

“David and Nathan”  
delivered Sunday, July 26, 2009  
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2 Samuel 11:26-12:15, 24

More than any other person, Israel is fascinated by David, deeply attracted to him, bewildered by him, and occasionally embarrassed by him. Our scripture today continues the episode in David's life that must have bewildered, embarrassed and appalled the people of Israel. David has become like a little god at the height of his royal, political and spiritual power, and his seductions of military might and security have skewed the moral vision of Israel. The king may act. The king may kill. The king may be self-satisfied. The king, however, is not capable of revising moral reality. In his deceit to cover up his act of adultery with Bathsheba, and his plot to kill Uriah, the king may have imagined he escaped the hard, non-negotiable reality of the old Torah tradition, and assumed he was morally autonomous and subject to no one. In the end, however, another moral vision is revealed and restored.

That's what today's story is about, the sequel to David and Bathsheba, if you will, the story of David and Nathan – which is one of the most dramatic, forceful passages in the Old Testament. What King David had ordered was exactly what had happened...until just now. David had sent for Bathsheba, he had her husband Uriah killed, and when Bathsheba's mourning was over she had become David's wife and bore him a son. “The thing that David had done displeased the Lord,” and before you know it, the prophet Nathan was knocking at the palace door and rapping upon the conscience of the king.

Episcopal priest and writer, Barbara Brown Taylor recounts this confrontation saying, “The way Nathan did it was pure genius – not head-on, like a fire and brimstone preacher, but sideways, with a story. Why did he take such an indirect route? Because he had not come to condemn David. That would have been easy enough to do, given the facts at hand, but Nathan was up to something much more profound than that. He had come to change David's life. Nathan's job was to help the king see what he had done, so that his conscience could be revived and his sense of justice restored. Then Israel might have the king they were supposed to have instead of this handsome hero whose power had begun to stink. If David could see that – if he could pronounce judgment on himself – the impact would be a hundred times greater than if Nathan did it for him. So Nathan told David a story, knowing good and well how human beings tend to drop their defenses while they are listening to a story about someone else.” (1)

The story Nathan told is clear and simple. Once upon a time...Once upon a time...there were two men, one rich and one poor. The rich man had everything - period. End of description. The poor man had very little but his one little lamb, which he treasured like daughter, nurtured with his own food and drink from his cup, and which he held in his arms when she slept. The rich man needed food for a feast. But instead of taking a lamb from his own flocks, of which he had plenty, he cruelly and arrogantly took the pet lamb of the poor man, killed it and served it to his guests. As Nathan tells the tale, the prophet's parable does its powerful work. David is drawn into the story. He rushes to the poor man's defense, and it is not until he has pronounced a death sentence on the rich man that he finds out what he has done. He has pronounced judgment on himself. "You are the man!" Nathan says to David, and for the first time in the whole sordid saga David sees what he has done. "I have sinned against the Lord," he said – not because Nathan told him so but because he had discovered it for himself – and that was the beginning of his coming

back to life again. By his own reaction to Nathan's parable, David had condemned himself to death, but that was not what God had in mind for him. "The Lord has put away your sin," Nathan told him. "You shall not die."

The truth of the matter is that David will spend the rest of his life living with the consequences of his sin. Old Testament professor, Walter Brueggemann, has said of this narrative: "The story outruns our articulation. The greatness of it cannot be uttered. Note only two things. First, this is not simply a story of sexual lust, though it is that. It is about mistaken, wrongly assumed moral autonomy. It is the telling of the heavy, sorry way of power and freedom, struggling within the elemental reality of God's rule. The story articulates and addresses the main moral issue for any culture, ancient or contemporary, which imagines itself so free, so secular, so mature, so technological that it may do whatever it wants. The story bears witness to a moral reality of God's governance that is not completely user-friendly." (2)

Just as Nathan's parable holds up a mirror to David, so this biblical account of David's "Big Sin" holds up a mirror to us so that we can see in the complexity of these Biblical characters ourselves, and our own complicity in our web of relationships. We will never commit the kinds of sins that the great King of ancient Israel has inscribed in his epitaph, but like David, we are heirs to a moral reality in which there are limits to our autonomy and freedom. We cross those limits – when they impinge upon the welfare of other human beings – at our own peril, we suffer the consequences of the wrongs we commit. And if we are lucky, we will discover not that what we have done has gone unnoticed in heaven, but that we are ultimately accountable to God.

No contemporary writer explains this more eloquently than Eugene Peterson who says, "One of the frequently misunderstood features of the gospel by outsiders is this: that a confession of sin isn't a groveling admission that I am a terrible person; it doesn't require what is sometimes described as 'beating yourself up.' Insiders to the gospel know that the sentence, 'I have sinned against the Lord' is a sentence full of hope. It's full of hope because it's a sentence full of God. In the Christian life our primary task isn't just to avoid sin, which is impossible anyway, but to recognize sin. ...When sin is discovered in us, our guilty fears often produce a sense of condemnation. But if we stay with the story – the God story, the David story, the Jesus story – before long the condemnation gives way to the surprised realization of grace, mercy and forgiveness.... David's sin, enormous as it was, was wildly outdone by God's grace." (3) And so is ours.

Joyce Hollyday tells of spending the night in a Washington D.C. jail cell some years ago for protesting nuclear weapons. She and her friends were in a large holding cell. Across from them was another cell filled with women arrested on prostitution charges. Joyce struck up a conversation with one of the women whose name was Gloria. Gloria confessed that she had made a number of mistakes in her life. She saw her arrest as a sign that she needed to make some changes, especially since she had a young son to care for. With a gleam of hope in her eyes, Gloria said, "God always gives us second chances." Around dawn, Hollyday said the women protesting the nuclear weapons in her cell began singing hymns. Then Gloria shouted to them, "Hey, do you all know Amazing Grace?" Soon strains of the hymn thundered through the corridor as the two sides of the cell block tried to out-sing each other. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. Laughter and singing filled the jail and before long a guard came to investigate all the commotion and try to silence them. "What's going on?" he asked brusquely. Gloria jumped up and pressed her face against the bars. Looking the guard squarely in the eyes she declared, "It's only the gospel." Hollyday reflected on that incident with these words: "Gloria knew exactly what she was talking about when she answered that guard. She

is a woman who knows that a generous and forgiving God sustains her. She understands the power of amazing grace... she finds hope in the gospel that makes it clear that we don't always get what we deserve. Thank God." (4)

From time to time, if we are careful to recognize our own leanings toward autonomy at any cost, then God sends us messengers like Nathan. Through stories like his, we will find that even the death sentences we have pronounced upon ourselves are lifted, because the recognition of sin is the beginning of grace. Things were never the same for David after "the matter of Uriah the Hittite." He buried his firstborn son. There were lasting consequences to what he had done that he lived with the rest of his life, but the point is that he lived. God took him back, and gave him new opportunities to exercise his God-given freedom. He and Bathsheba had a second son named Solomon who ruled Israel for forty years with unprecedented wisdom. The child's name, Solomon, is derived from the Hebrew word, SHALOM, peace. The placement of Solomon's birth in the end of this gut wrenching narrative is stunning. Solomon is born so close to the sordidness, nonetheless, life begins again for this family.

The account of David and Bathsheba, and of David and Nathan, is a tale of alienation and judgment, to be sure. However, there are gestures of grace, made over and over again by God, that keep David at the focal point of ancient Israel's glory days. If we remember David as a hero, though, I hope it is not because of Goliath, or the war stories, or any other greatness. I hope it is because of that moment with Nathan, when David saw who he was, and said so, so that God could respond: "I have put away your sin..." We don't always get what we deserve. Thank God. AMEN.

#### NOTES

- 1) Barbara Brown Taylor, "You are the Man," in Bread of Angels , p. 12.
- 2) Walter Brueggemann, Interpretation: First and Second Samuel, p. 285.
- 3) Eugene Peterson, Leap Over a Wall, p. 186.
- 4) Joyce Hollyday, Then Your Light Shall Rise, p. 32 & 40, quoted by Kim Richter in "Outdone by Grace," 8/3/97.