

I imagine that Nathan argued with God. “Lord, you don’t know what you are asking.” “Lord, David is not going to listen to me. The prophet Gad has a much better relationship with him.” “Lord, I still have many years of productive service left in me. Send an older prophet who is near retirement.” “Lord, there is a nice little synagogue in southern Judah and they are looking for a rabbi. I am just letting you know that I am resigning my job as prophet and applying for the rabbi position.” It is not hard to imagine all the ways that Nathan argued with God about his assignment.

But somewhere along the way, Nathan found that inner reserve of courage and surrendered himself to whatever fate awaited him. My friend, Kim Trammell, recently gave me a bookmark with this quote, “From the middle of life onward, only he remains vitally alive who is ready to die with life.”² Nathan chose to remain vitally alive even though it could cost him his life.

“Nathan came to David and said, ‘Once upon a time.’ Nathan knew the king’s soul. Nathan knew the king’s values. Nathan knew the power of story. Nathan used this powerful prophetic parable to help the king see the darkness in his own heart.

David was an adulterer, liar, and murderer. But David was also a gentle soul; a man who could hear the story of a little lamb and get teary-eyed; a man who could feel the suffering of the poor with genuine empathy; a man who had a deep sense of justice and fairness; a man who knew the difference between right and wrong; a man who saw himself as a

defender of righteousness; and yes, even a man after God’s own heart. None of us is just good or bad. Nathan skillfully used this paradox of good and evil to help David see the inconvenient truth about himself.

“You are the man!” And David said, “I have sinned against the LORD.” There is no excusing of David’s sin. There is no diminishing the consequences of David’s behavior. David’s abuse of power has destroyed several lives and he must pay. But what makes David great is his ability to confess and repent.

“If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all iniquity.” In just a moment, we will eat a meal together. *The bread which we break is a sharing in the body of Christ. The cup over which we give thanks is a sharing in the blood of Christ.* The body and blood of Christ are given as a perpetual reminder that we are sinners and that there is forgiveness for the worst of sinners. Thanks be to God.

¹ Hebrews 1:1a, King James Version

² A quote from Carl Jung on a bookmark. No reference given.



August 6, 2006
Ninth Sunday of Kingdomtide

Grace That Is Greater than
All Our Sin

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

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Nathan asked for just a few minutes of the king's time. If it was inconvenient, he could come back another time. "No, no, please come in and state your business," the king said.

The prophet began, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor." Immediately, the king was hooked. He remembered his own days of poverty. He had a soft spot in his heart for the struggles of the poor. Maybe this was a situation that he could remedy. He listened with interest. "Please go on," he said.

"The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom. It was like a daughter to him."

The king remembered the special lambs that he had raised. It was not hard for him to recall the names he had given to them and the many nights that they had kept him warm and shared his meager meal. He remembered the times he had risked his life rescuing his precious lambs from the lion and the bear and how his heart broke every time his father Jesse demanded that one be sold to provide for the needs of the family. "One day," he had promised himself, "I will be rich enough that I never have to sell one of my precious ones." These memories came flooding back to him as he listened to the story.

The old prophet continued, "Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own

flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him. . ."

The king knew what was about to happen even before the prophet told him and he could feel his anger rising. The poor were often indentured to the rich. Everything they owned belonged to their master, including their very lives.

"He took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest that had come to him."

Something seemed to snap inside the king. Before the prophet could finish the story, the king was on his feet, his face reddened with anger, and his voice shouting, "As the LORD lives the man who has done this thing deserves to die."

The prophet took a deep breath, braced himself, offered a silent prayer, looked the king square in the eye, and said, "You are the man!"

How do you tell the king that he is an adulterer, liar, and murderer? The answer: Very carefully! We have been following the life of David this summer. The story of David's tryst with Bathsheba is one of the saddest stories in the Bible. But the biblical literature is very honest, even about her heroes. David was "a man after God's own heart." "But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD."

David thought that he was very clever. David thought that he had solved the problem. David thought that he was through with this unfortunate incident. David thought that his deadly deception had worked. But David had only managed to deceive himself.

"And the LORD sent Nathan to

David." One day, Nathan is imagining what furniture he wants in his office in the new temple and the next day he is summoned to confront the king who has already killed one faithful servant in order to keep his deadly secret. Why would he hesitate to kill Nathan?

We don't know how Nathan got the word of David's dirty deed. Maybe he heard the rumors. It is hard to keep secrets. Maybe it was a flash of insightful intuition. Sometimes you just know without being told. Maybe it was a divine vision. What is it that the old King James Version says, "(God spoke to God's prophets) at sundry times and in divers manners."¹ We don't know how the prophet knew. What we do know is that it was the prophet's job to confront the king. It is always the prophet's job to speak the hard truth, the unwanted truth, the truth that is too truthful to be heard or spoken.

Powerful leaders need divine prophets. Advisors tell the convenient truth. But prophets tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. They are the necessary gadflies, the essential critical voices, the corrective spiritual lens for deluded secular power. David did not want to hear the truth. David had gone to great lengths to conceal the truth. "(But) the LORD sent Nathan."

I imagine that Nathan wished to goodness that he did not know the truth. Do you remember when you learned the truth about a friend, lover, mentor, family member, that you wished that you did not know? Truth is often inconvenient and I imagine that Nathan wished that he did not know.