

Nathan Tells a Parable

I fell in love with literature when I was a boy, immersing myself in the tragedies and heroics of characters



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that sometimes confused, disappointed and amazed me. There was Chaucer, Steinbeck, Faulkner and so many more with their riveting stories. When I followed Jesus a new literature captured my attention, at first because it was introduced as my Christian operations manual. But very quickly I discovered the stories of real people who are like me, struggling to maintain spiritual balance, imperfect and sometimes foolish beyond belief. This Bible, beginning with God, records what is and what can be by the grace of God. Its sometimes discomfiting words are translated into hope solely because of God.

David and Bathsheba. Now there is a blockbuster of entertainment, including lust, murder, deception, death and the consequences of shutting God out of heart and mind. In Psalm 51, which is poetry, not narrative, we read King David's confession and plea for God's love: Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment (Ps. 51:1-4). Language like that is a rarity in the world of politics and power, both in David's day and in ours. The truth is, David's spiritual crisis is our crisis, the plague of humanity, the distortion of truth and love by deliberate selfishness, and the delusion that we are god!

The prophet Nathan, sent by God, was King David's spiritual advisor. He was faced with how to tell David that his adulterous relationship with

Uriah's wife violated common decency and made a mockery of the king's faith in God. Truth is speaking to power in a world not unlike our own. We are familiar with the statement in 1 Samuel 13:14 that David was a "man after (God's) own heart." Do not forget the first half of that memorable phrase: David was "a man." Every one of us, for all our head knowledge and freedom of choice, find it all too easy to serve self. Nathan was a key figure in David's life, declaring God's covenant promise, securing his throne and shaping his worship.

The lives of David and Nathan are intertwined, so how does the prophet confront his king and friend? The need was not for a palm reader to tell David's fortune, a philosopher to discuss the fine points of popular ethics, or a mystical vision of divine punishment.

Evil is not an exterior force that entraps us. It is the basest urging of survival, selfishness and pride that smothers conscience and judgment. David, who could have whatever he wanted, saw another man's wife and wanted her. No matter that this was adultery, that the woman's husband was a soldier willing to put his life in danger for his king or that David wanted Bathsheba at that moment more than he wanted God's love and blessing.

Nathan tells a tragic story about a rich man who owned flocks of sheep, but takes a poor man's only pet lamb to feed a traveler. The language is quite touching and David reacts angrily: "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die" (v. 5). Nathan says simply, "You are the man!" (v.7).

There are no winners in this tragic story. Uriah is sent to die on the front line of battle. Bathsheba is reduced to a "thing" to please a selfish man. A baby dies. David satisfies his lust but in doing so will experience family divisions, heartache and a haunting guilt for the rest of his life. David did repent and God "put away" David's sin (v. 13), but the repercussions of David's choices harmed many.

The telling of this tragedy instructs

Formations

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Scripture: 2 Samuel 12:1-10

us today about the connection between spiritual truth and the realities of life. We often fail to understand the difference between religion and faith. Religion is tradition, ritual and theological ideas. Faith, in the biblical sense, is a personal belief in the God who loves us individually and comes into our world as one of us to offer his redemptive grace. We are quite adept at joining a religious organization, memorizing religious formulas, observing rituals and invoking God's name over our ideas. But the Bible repeatedly teaches that faith in God is a deeply personal matter that must shape our emotions, thinking and actions.

Today's text is a story about choices. God allows us an incredible freedom of choice. He also offers us plenty of material in the Bible about real people, their mistakes and his gift of forgiveness in which there is a new kind of living. As we look at David we are reminded of our own vulnerabilities. But the gospel of God's grace, which David experienced, offers us hope in our weakest moments. Have you ever faced your own failure with honesty, asking why and wondering how to undo the harm? We hold on to the promise of 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Only through the grace of God can we live beyond those choices and actions that have brought harm to others as well as ourselves.

We live in a troubled world, but remember God did not just observe us from heaven above, warning us of judgment to come and reminding us we do not deserve mercy. God comes to us in our world as the Holy Spirit, guiding and blessing us as we struggle through challenging circumstances every day. When David lost his way, God sent Nathan to help David find his way back. May God help each of us to be a Nathan for someone lost in the darkness of this world.