

# Speaking Truth to Power

## 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

<sup>26</sup> When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. <sup>27</sup> When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son.

But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD, <sup>12:1</sup> and the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. <sup>2</sup> The rich man had very many flocks and herds; <sup>3</sup> 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, and it was like a daughter to him. <sup>4</sup> 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, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." <sup>5</sup> Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; <sup>6</sup> he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

<sup>7</sup> Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; <sup>8</sup> I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. <sup>9</sup> Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. <sup>10</sup> Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. <sup>11</sup> Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. <sup>12</sup> For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun." <sup>13</sup> David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD."

This passage could be entitled, "David and Bathsheba, Part 2." The David we encounter walking on the parapet of his castle in Jerusalem was a noncombatant ruler of a basically pacified realm. His many difficulties seemed to be mostly in the past, and he felt thankful for his many blessings, as we can see in many psalms attributed to him. However, it was not clear where he and the institutions he had constructed would be led in the future. Perhaps he would build a temple, a house for the ark.

Then he saw Bathsheba.

She was the wife of a noted soldier, Uriah the Hittite, possibly a mercenary in David's special forces, and she was evidently quite beautiful. She was taking a ritual

bath, usually done in modest privacy, on the roof of a nearby house. Perhaps Bathsheba believed that no one could see her bathing. In any case, David was filled with lust. He sent servants to bring her to the palace. She got pregnant and David realized what a scandal it would be if one of his famous warriors found out that he, his commander in chief, had slept with his wife. David tried to cover his covetous behavior toward his neighbor's wife by calling the husband home on temporary leave "to report on the progress of the battle." Surely, he would take advantage of his time at home to visit his wife, so that no one would wonder about whose child it was when she delivered. Uriah preferred to bunk with the palace guards and did not visit her.

Drastic steps had to be taken to cover up the affair. Thus, David plotted with his loyal general, Joab, to have Uriah assigned to a vulnerable position when he returned to the front. Joab did as instructed. Uriah was killed. "When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, becoming a part of David's harem, which he had taken over from the deceased Saul; and she bore him a son" (vv. 26-27). These two verses tell it all: David's adultery, Bathsheba's pregnancy, Uriah's murder. After all his scheming and duplicity, it seems that everything has turned out all right for David. With Uriah out of the picture, Bathsheba's pregnancy is legitimized, and no one is the wiser. Wait! Now comes a word from the Lord.

God, who has witnessed the whole sordid affair, weighs in: "But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD" (v. 27b). This line is better translated literally: "The thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of God." In this rendering, it stands in sharp contrast to David's assuring words to Joab in verse 25: "Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes." David thinks his misdeeds are hidden and all is well, but God has seen it all and declares it evil.

We know all too well that people can do horrible things when they think no one is looking. Anonymity breeds cruelty and self-serving behavior. Open any newspaper

and you will find examples of good people behaving badly because they thought no one was looking. Whether it is bullying online, or insider trading, or killing civilians in a time of war—there is no end to the trouble people can get into if they think they will not get caught. What David is about to discover is what every person of faith needs to remember: we live ever before God. Even when our actions are hidden from all other people, God knows our every move—and stands in judgment. As the opening words of Psalm 139 declare: "O LORD, you have searched me and known me." If David had simply remembered this, he might not have gotten into such trouble.

How do you confront someone who commands vast authority and power and uses his or her position to commit atrocious evil? It is a question that haunts history. Those with little or no influence have struggled mightily with how to hold accountable those who are in power and who possess the resources to enforce their will through violence, imprisonment, and death. This is the situation that Nathan the prophet faces with King David. The monarch forced himself sexually upon Bathsheba. When she became pregnant by him and David was unable to get her husband, Uriah, to sleep with her because he was consecrated for battle, David ordered that the innocent man be sent to the front line, where he was killed. The story smacks of Lord Acton's observation that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

If you are a prophet, if you are the mouthpiece of God, who demands moral accountability, and if you encounter such abusive power, what can you possibly do? Given how brutal and unconscionable the king's actions are, you have good reason to fear that it would be dangerous to confront David head-on about his malfeasance. David did not hesitate to send Uriah to his death, so why should he not do the same to you if you cross purposes with him?

However, as a prophet, Nathan cannot let the evil go unchallenged. He uses the strategy of indirect communication, telling a parable that awakens David's empathic imagination. The strategy is perfectly matched to the king's own talent for expressing

himself in poetic, imaginative ways. David was esteemed as a gifted poet and musician. Furthermore, as a youth David was a shepherd.

God's judgment is delivered by the prophet Nathan. The last time Nathan spoke to David (2 Sam. 7:1-17), it was to declare God's promise to watch over David and make a great name for him. God did all that was promised—and more. Now, Nathan is the bearer of judgment, and he proceeds carefully. He tells David a story about an arrogant rich man who, needing to feed some guests, takes a beloved sheep from a poor man and slaughters it.

David identifies emotionally with the poor man in the parable and is indignant on his behalf (v. 5). Seen from the poor man's perspective, what the rich man did was a blatant abuse of power. The parable has engaged a side of David that is totally different from the man who forces sex upon Bathsheba and orders the death of her husband Uriah. David is no longer the absolutist king acting from the prerogatives of power and authority. Nathan's parable has touched the moral sensibilities of David's humanity.

David is outraged by the rich man's behavior, declaring, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die!" (v. 5b). Nathan turns on David and says, "You are the man!" (v. 7a). Nathan informs David that in fact he and the rich man are morally identical (v. 7). They both have taken what they want but do not need from someone who has no power to refuse them. The crime they have in common is the victimization of the powerless, which is completely counter to God's will (see Mic. 2:1-2; Amos 2:6-7; 5:10-11; Isa. 3:14-15; 5:8-9).

In his condemnation of the rich man, David has judged himself as one who "deserves to die" (v. 5). While Saul died for his unfaithfulness to the Lord (1 Chr. 10:13), David's punishment will take another form. God had promised to "establish" David's "throne" forever, stipulating that the human sins of David's "house" would be punished "with blows inflicted by human beings" (2 Sam. 7:14-16). Thus, God decrees

that the violence done by David to Uriah will bring unending violence to David's "house."

The story is not done, but some consequences were already apparent. Others were more long range. The prophet Nathan informed David that he could not build the temple he was dreaming about, for he had blood on his hands. Through the parable about a poor man who has his only lamb stolen from him by a powerful man who has many sheep, Nathan condemned David to his face and warned him that there would not be peace in his house, because of his sin. After listening to the litany of dire consequences that will befall him, David does something unexpected: he confesses. "I have sinned against the LORD" (v. 13a). Lesser men might have killed Nathan, but as low as David has fallen, he is still a man of profound faith. He admits his crime without excuse or hesitation. David repented and asked for God's forgiveness. The model political leader saw himself as exercising power under moral law and for godly purposes. **Max L. Stackhouse**

Psalm 51 has traditionally been believed to be David's confession to God, and his request for cleansing and pardon:

- <sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.
- <sup>2</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.
- <sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.
- <sup>4</sup> 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.
- <sup>5</sup> Indeed, I was born guilty,  
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- <sup>6</sup> You desire truth in the inward being;<sup>[a]</sup>  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- <sup>7</sup> Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;

- wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- <sup>8</sup> Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- <sup>9</sup> Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.
- <sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right<sup>Ⓜ</sup> spirit within me.
- <sup>11</sup> Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing<sup>Ⓜ</sup> spirit.
- <sup>13</sup> Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.
- <sup>14</sup> Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
- <sup>15</sup> O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- <sup>16</sup> For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
- <sup>17</sup> The sacrifice acceptable to God<sup>Ⓜ</sup> is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

This passage is a vivid example of speaking truth to power, and Christians would do well to pay attention to the details. First, notice that God chose Nathan to deliver God's message because Nathan had access to David. There was a preexisting relationship that allowed the prophet to speak to the king. Having access to people with power is critical if the church is going to speak its truth.

The second lesson this passage offers is about the form of the message. Nathan does not confront David head-on by saying, "God knows you slept with Bathsheba and killed Uriah, and you are in trouble!" Instead, he reframes the truth in a way that David can hear it, engage it, and respond to it. In fact, Nathan's story is so effective David is condemned by his own words. Right now, there is a great deal of injustice and oppression in our society, and we, as Christians, are called to name those sins. However, we will not get anywhere if all we do is point the finger of judgment at those in power. Nathan's example invites us to reframe the message so everyone stands on

common ground. If all we do is condemn others, our words will fall on deaf and defensive ears.

The last lesson concerns the true purpose of judgment. The mark of Nathan's success is not that he tricks David into condemning David's own actions. It is not even when Nathan cries out, "You are the man!" Instead, Nathan is successful when David confesses—for that is the true purpose of God's judgment. God judges us not to condemn us, but to transform us by bringing about repentance. Whether the word "repent" is in Hebrew or in Greek, it means to "turn around" or "turn back." Ultimately, that is God's deepest desire: that we turn from our sinful ways and return to God. There may be consequences to our sinful acts, but God is always willing to put our sins aside and restore us to right relationship.

The story of David, Bathsheba, Uriah, and Nathan is far more than a palace scandal, the kind of revelation that tabloids and talk shows love to exploit. This episode is not the last word on David, but it is a defining moment. He is still the greatest king of Israel, but this story reveals that even the mightiest king must live by the word of God. We hear an echo of this truth in the first chapter of Matthew, where the lineage of Jesus is traced: "And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah" (v. 6).

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