

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 8/1/2021, 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

Nathan said to David, "You are the man."

Our Sunday readings follow a three-year cycle. Last summer our Old Testament stories were from the Torah, primarily Genesis and Exodus. The summer we hear about the kings in Israel. Next summer, we will focus on the prophets.

Even though this summer's focus is kings, not prophets, today we get Nathan, an extraordinary prophet. We met Nathan a couple of weeks ago, when he seemed to be growing into his prophetic role. Back then, David asked Nathan's advice about building a house for God. Remember? Nathan told David to go for it, but then God came to Nathan and Nathan had to go back to David and tell David that Nathan had been wrong, and that David was not the one to build a house for God.

This time, David had not sent for Nathan to ask his advice. Last week we had the sordid tale of David and Bathsheba and Uriah that resulted in David essentially ordering Uriah's death. As we just heard, Bathsheba then lamented and because one of David's wives and bore a son.

But the thing David had done displeased the Lord. (Remember that line, by the way, whenever you are tempted to think that Bathsheba shared any blame in this squalid story.) Last week we talked about all the sending David did. This time, David did not "send" for Nathan: but the Lord did. The Lord sent Nathan to David. The last time Nathan shared a prophetic vision with David, he did it straight. In chapter 7, "Nathan reported all of these words and this entire vision to David." This time, Nathan takes a different tack. This time, Nathan tells David a story.

He tells a story about a poor man who raised a ewe lamb like a daughter. Then a rich man took that lamb and fed it to a guest because the rich man didn't want to use one of his own many lambs. Lambs whom he did not love the way the poor man loved his lamb.

David, of course, is outraged, not recognizing himself as the rich man in the story. Nathan's role as a prophet here is something like the roles of court jesters, who could tell the truth or even give advice in a comic way. Nathan confronted David here not in a comic way, and not straight, but in a way that David could hear.

Do you have any prophets in your life? You might think about people who are wise and whose advice you seek, the way David sought Nathan's advice, but sometimes prophets aren't people we seek out. Sometimes they offer unsolicited advice or even an annoying comment on a social media post. This does not mean that all unwelcome advice or trollish Facebook comments are prophetic, but prophets often—maybe even usually—tell us things we don't want to hear. They can be argumentative. Annoying.

Prophets can help us hear the word of God.

We need to be exposed to different points of view. I am concerned about that in our country right now. We are polarized and want to live and work and play and worship among people who agree with us. Being around people with different points of view can be enriching, and holy, and deeply difficult.

I told you last week that I thought David's soul was not alive when all this happened. If Nathan had not spoken out, I wonder what would have happened to Nathan's soul as well: if Nathan had pretended he hadn't seen or didn't know the extent of David's sin. What would that have done to Nathan's soul? And would David's soul have ever recovered if he had not been forced to confront his sin?

I admire prophets because they don't turn away. They confront. They challenge. And different ones use different methods. Jeremiah had the dirty underwear strategy, for example. He wore underwear for a while and then buried it and then took it back out to wave around and tell Judah that's what was going to happen to them if they didn't change their ways. Pretty weird—but creative. Like Nathan.

David had enormous power, which he abused, so Nathan knew that confronting David was dangerous.

He gained David's sympathy. There was a poor man, with nothing but one little ewe lamb. It was like a daughter to him. Nathan offers endearing details: the lamb slept on the man's bosom and drank from his cup.

The lamb drinking from the poor man's cup is an image that will haunt me forever.

David became enraged. He said, "The man who has done this deserves to die. He had no pity."

And then: You are the man.

*Atah ha'ish.*

Sometimes this phrase has been an idiom that means, congratulations. But here, in its original usage, it's a condemnation.

Nathan found a way to get David to listen to him. Even though David had casually killed messengers before, this time he listened, accepted his punishment, and Nathan and David continued to have a relationship.

This is a different way to operate than Jeremiah and the dirty underwear. This is different than telling someone what you think of them and stomping out.

In our polarized society, people seem willing to sever relationships with people who disagree with them. Sometimes this is necessary. Sometimes there has been abuse or exploitation and ending a relationship is the only way.

But sometimes we can be prophets to each other and stay in relationship. Sometimes we can creatively show each other ways that we are not living into our baptismal covenant with God: persevering in resisting evil; seeking and serving Christ in all persons; striving for justice and peace among all people: sometimes we can hold up a mirror to each other, like Nathan did to David, without ending the relationship.

If Nathan had skipped the story of the ewe lamb and just started shouting “Why have you despised the word of the LORD to do evil in his sight,” would David have listened? I don’t know, but I doubt it. Would you?

Do you listen well to hard things?

What do you do that lets people you love hear you?

What kind of prophets are in your life, and who are they?

What kind of prophet are you?