

Sermon: When Stories Collide

Year B, Proper 13

[2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a; Psalm 51:1-12; Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Psalm 78:23-29; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35](#)

Offered August 5, 2018 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

At the end of the reading last week, David was sitting pretty. He had had his fling with Bathsheba, and, oh crud, there was a baby. David had worked the situation around so that, as far as he was concerned, the baby could plausibly be Bathsheba's husband's. Her husband, Uriah, was dead on the battlefield. But the person who had received the order to make sure Uriah died on the battlefield would never tell. So, David was sitting pretty. When he told the story of his life, he could just skip over the coveting, the adultery and the murder. Because no one had seen anything. And he was the king.

Except that he had done *evil in the sight of the LORD* (2 Samuel 12:9). During last week's reading, there was a lot of "taking",¹ including of Bathsheba, and there was a lot of "sending", with David sending people to get Bathsheba, having Uriah sent back to Jerusalem, sent to his house, sent back to battle carrying his own death warrant. Twelve times David "sends" something or someone.² David's using his power as king to make sure that David's own story is the way David wants to tell it. All that "sending" comes to an end when the LORD *sends* Nathan to David (2 Samuel 12:1).³ All that "taking" comes to an end when David is confronted with all that he took in light of what the LORD *gave*: the throne of Israel, rescue from Saul, the palace, Saul's harem, and more to come (2 Samuel 12:7-8).⁴ All the "taking", all the "sending", comes to an end and David confesses, "*I have sinned against the LORD.*" (2 Samuel 12:15)

We can look at this story and hear a message loud and clear: no coveting, no adultery, no murder. That's definitely in there. But we learned God's position on coveting, adultery and murder all the way back at Exodus 20 when we got the Big 10 Commandments in the first place. That was seven books ago. I argued last week that God revealed something about God's self through this squalid story. That you can make a terrible mistake and still remain in relationship with God. That using our power to pretend that we control reality endangers our relationship with the true Controller of Reality. That God is not looking for perfection or power. That a squalid story gets included in Holy Scripture because God doesn't work the way we would, hiding the raw and ugly bits of our life stories. God is right there with us in the parts we'd rather no one else knows about, the parts we'd rather forget.

What does this week's reading tell us about God? What is God revealing here? At a high level, God sends a person to speak for God, in this case Nathan. But notice that God sends someone

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 281.

² Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, "Proper 13, Exegetical Perspective, 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a" in *Feasting on the Word: Year B Additional Essays*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012], 2.

³ Robertson Farmer, 4.

⁴ Brueggemann, 281.

with access to David to speak truth to power.⁵ If we want to speak truth to power, we have to have access to power, which we may need to cultivate.⁶ Notice that Nathan doesn't come straight at David and tell him that he has violated Torah. He tells him a story that David can agree with.⁷

But it is far more than a "gotcha" moment. If Nathan wants to highlight the lies that David is telling himself, there's much more direct and effective ways to do that. All servants at the palace knew David had something going on with Bathsheba.⁸ All the servants at the palace knew that David burst into activity after word of the baby came from Bathsheba. The way Uriah was killed on the battlefield was pretty odd. If the point of the prophet is to make it clear to David that he had broken the sacred rules, this story is pretty pointless. For a sophisticated urbane people as the Israelites were when this story was written down and included in the sacred text, it would seem kinda cutesy, the way it does to us.⁹ Indeed it makes David look a little slow witted to not see through it.¹⁰ And everything we know about David tells us he was not slow on the uptake.

What breaks open David's heart is not the coveting, adultery or murder. He hears the story about the rich man taking the poor man's lamb and he cries out, *the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.* (2 Samuel 12:5-6). A better translation for "pity" might be "compassion" or "empathy."¹¹ The deforming sin, the thing that separated the rich man from the love of God, was his lack of compassion.

As Christians, we are called to follow the truth of God as revealed through Torah, through the teachings of the Hebrew Bible. *Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill,* Jesus says in Matthew 5:17. As Christians, we are also called to follow the truth of God as revealed through Jesus. And he was crystal clear about the role of compassion. We could have power, we could have wealth, we could have everything the world would tell us was right and good, but if we could not put those gifts that God had given us to the service of others, if we could not offer compassion, then we were not walking in the Way of Jesus of Nazareth.

The power of the parable that Nathan tells David is many-fold. It allows David to be on the same side as Nathan. It lays the groundwork for David to see the laws he has broken. It allows David to see the true flaw underlying all his actions with Bathsheba and Uriah, a complete lack of compassion. But there are other ways to accomplish all that. The power of Nathan's parable, I think, is that it brings another narrative into conflict with David's self-aggrandizing narrative.¹²

⁵ Shawnthea Monroe, "Proper 13, Pastoral Perspective, 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a" in *Feasting on the Word: Year B Additional Essays*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012], 5.

⁶ Monroe, 5.

⁷ Monroe, 5.

⁸ Moshe Garsiel, "The Story of David and Bathsheba: A Different Approach." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (1993), 257.

⁹ Brueggemann, 285.

¹⁰ George B. Caird, "The First and Second Books of Samuel: Exegesis," vol. 2 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1953), 1102.

¹¹ George W. Coats, "2 Samuel 12:1-7a." *Interpretation* 40, no. 2 (1986), 171.

¹² William H. Willimon, "A Peculiarly Christian Account of Sin." *Theology Today* 50, no. 2 (1993), 224.

David's story said he was acting in secret, that no one knew.¹³ David was acting as if he had no other story than what he made up himself, the story where he was rich and powerful and completely autonomous.¹⁴ Which just wasn't true. The collision of the two stories, Nathan's parable and David's real-world actions, revealed God's covenantal story.¹⁵ God's story, of which we are a part, is about truth and justice, compassion and coherence across all of creation. The collision of the two stories reveals the truth that has been there all along. God has given great gifts, *and if that had been too little, the LORD would have added as much more* (2 Samuel 12:8).

To David's great credit, just when any human author would have written David off as having been corrupted absolutely by his absolute power,¹⁶ to David's great credit, he confesses. David returns to obedience not only to Torah, to the Law, but to God's story,¹⁷ where compassion for the weak, for the widows and orphans and foreigners among you, is paramount. Having been seduced by a false story of royal power, David courageously resubmits to Yahweh's truthful account of the way things stand between us and a God who manages to be both truthful and gracious, a God whose truthfulness is grace.¹⁸

As Christians, we are called to follow the Way of Jesus Christ. We are part of the story of Sinai and the great tablets, as well as of King David. We are part of the story when the star appeared over King David's city of Bethlehem and again when the sun was darkened over Calvary. The whole of God's covenantal story is a story of redemption.¹⁹ We have been given a role in God's story so we can compare it to the story we tell ourselves when we think no one has seen what we've done. We make terrible mistakes, we sin, we separate ourselves from God. If that were the only truth, then, yes, it would be such a hopeless life we'd been offered.²⁰ But God offers us another more truthful, more grace-filled story. So long as we look at ourselves only through the broken lens of our own sin, we will never get an accurate picture of ourselves.²¹ We need to look through the lens that Jesus has offered us if we want to see ourselves truthfully.²²

¹³ Willimon, 224.

¹⁴ Willimon, 226.

¹⁵ Willimon, 226.

¹⁶ Willimon, 226.

¹⁷ Willimon, 226.

¹⁸ Willimon, 226.

¹⁹ Willimon, 227.

²⁰ Willimon, 227.

²¹ Willimon, 227.

²² Willimon, 227.