

An Icky Tale
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August 4, 2024 – Pentecost 11B
2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

Newton's Third Law states that for every action, there is an opposite and equal reaction. It's not just true in physics. It's true in terms of everyday human living as well, where it's perhaps best summed up as, "mess around, and find out." Which is exactly what David has done: he's messed around, and is about to find out that he's not going to get away with it. This is not a new or unfamiliar story. It seems to be a truth that political power brings with it an attitude of "I can do whatever I want and get away with it" for some of the people who hold it. That is, until some scandalous episode ends up splashed across the tabloids, the subject of a Congressional hearing, or worse.

The story of David and Bathsheba is one of the ickier ones in the Bible, and not just because it involves an affair, a murder, and a coverup of the murder. There are at least four possible points for serious discussion here.

- The first, and most obvious, is the abuse of power. David and Bathsheba are not even close to being equals. He's the king in a patriarchal society, and she's just a woman who is considered only the rightful property of another. David takes advantage of that when he "claims" her as one would claim, say, a piece of land or a herd of goats.
- The second is role the prophet Nathan takes in speaking truth to power.
- The third is that just because God extends forgiveness to David, it does not mean God will forget, or fail to demand some sort of accountability from David and his family for his actions.

- And, finally: what about poor Bathsheba, the woman at the center of this story? She barely speaks at all, does not appear to have any agency in what happens to her. She also flat out disappears until the very end of 2 Samuel, where she is asked to secure the place of her son Solomon as David's successor.

I'd like to focus on three of these issues: Bathsheba's missing voice, the abuse of power, and the prophet's role in speaking truth to power.

We don't know a lot about the character Bathsheba. What details we are given about her come only about her relationships to the men around her. She's the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, and the object of David's lust. While she gives in to his desires, she may not have had much of a choice in the matter. And, right along with David, she also suffers the consequences for this sordid affair when their first child, the product of the affair, dies. (Which, oddly, the compilers of the lectionary chose to leave out.) What is particularly disturbing to modern interpreters of the story is her lack of agency. Like the poor man's ewe lamb in Nathan's parable, things are done *to* her, and without any indication that she has a choice about withholding consent. David takes her, just as the prophet Samuel had warned that a king would take the best of what the people had to offer for his own use. So we are left to wonder: if the writers had bothered to include her voice in this tale, what would she have said about it?

The second issue is David's abuse of power. His actions toward Bathsheba directly violate at least three of the Ten Commandments. He's coveted another man's wife. He's committed adultery with her. He had her husband murdered, and in such a way as to make it look like anything but a murder for which he himself was directly

responsible. And then, he more or less acknowledges the whole thing by marrying Bathsheba after "the appropriate time for mourning" had passed. Problem is, David is The Man. He can do what he wants. Or so he thinks. One of the distinct features in this story is that he escapes immediate consequences through a quick display of contrition and repentance when he is finally confronted.¹ God has other ideas about that, however. In keeping with the spirit of the law codes outlined in Exodus, David's sins will be paid for by several of his children. Perhaps the most notable among them would be his son Absalom, who, after attempting a coup, would get caught in a tree by his hair and die from his injuries.

The third facet of this story is the prophet Nathan speaking truth to power. He is what we might call a public theologian. That is, he takes seriously the 3-fold call to say what God had told him to, loudly and out in the public sphere; the task of interpreting what's happening in light of what he knows about God; and finally to call out leaders who fail to act with the community's best interests in mind. In this case, Nathan tells a parable about a rich man stealing a poor man's ewe lamb to hold up the mirror to David about his foul behavior. It's a gentler way of getting at it than a direct confrontation would be. Once David has absorbed the story, Nathan's tone abruptly changes to "... direct accusation. Nathan stunningly reveals that David is the rich man. He had unlimited material goods. He had power. Yet he took away the sole material good of the other man. The violation is named not against Bathsheba nor Uriah, but against God's very teaching as revealed in the rhetorical statement, 'Why have you despised the word

¹ John J. Collins, Introduction to the Hebrew Bible (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 240.

of the LORD?"² Remarkably, David does not have Nathan killed for this parable, or his declaration that "YOU are the man!" Instead, he accepts responsibility, showing that, despite this lapse in judgment, David still has some morals.

Sadly, very little has changed when it comes to abuses of power and privilege. There are many Davids, and even more Bathshebas, remaining in the world. Some of them prey on children. Some of them employ elaborate schemes to maintain unfettered access to money and unsuspecting women. Some of them exploit workers by paying starvation wages for very demanding jobs. And the effects are devastating. Just ask someone who works over 40 hours a week for minimum wage and is always at risk of losing their housing or not being able to eat. Just ask anyone who has been a victim of a human trafficking or any kind of abuse. They will tell you it is devastating physically, emotionally, and spiritually, and that there is no "just getting over it." Because of their experiences, which very often lead to their being blamed for having been put into those situations in the first place, it bears asking where the Nathans are. It also bears asking if we are willing not just to believe them but also not trash them for telling the truth, especially when those in positions of power "... conspire to protect [their public image of success] instead of the lives and psyches of vulnerable [individuals]?... Where is a modern-day Nathan when our own greed, acquisitiveness, and consumerism reach out for more and more leaving others with less and less?"³ And when that finger is pointed at us – which is a definite risk of occupying a position of privilege or authority – are we

² Roger Nam, "Commentary on 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-2/commentary-on-2-samuel-1126-27121-13-4-2> [accessed July 29, 2024].

³ The Rev. Dr. Eric Barreto, "ON Scripture: Nathan Rebukes David." https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003263/on_scripture_nathan_rebukes_david [accessed July 29, 2024].

willing to admit what we've done, repent, and, at least in that one instance, accept that our actions have a price?