

Who Is It?
May 21, 2017
II Samuel 12:1-14
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
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To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/sermon5-21_2017-05-21_11-20-08_t001_in1.mp3

As we continue in our exploration of the life of King David, let's take a quick look back at the story we encountered last week. Those who were here will remember that David – who had been called the *nagid* of YHWH – the “prince of God” – abandoned that role by making quick work of at least four of the Ten Commandments. As he lay around the palace one evening, it seemed, for some reason, like a good idea for him to “send” for and “take” a vulnerable young woman. In the process, he breezed right through coveting and lying en route to an adultery that wound up in murder. It seems like a far cry from the earnest, prayer-filled, justice-seeking shepherd who was willing to go up against Goliath thirty years ago.



¹As we begin II Samuel 12, the scene shifts. Whereas in chapter 11, it was David who did all the “sending” (at least four times, by my count), this part of the story begins with YHWH sending the prophet Nathan to visit the king. They're not in the temple, but David is going to church, I can tell you that. The preacher starts in with a story, and the audience of one is compelled to listen. I mean, Nathan's story just draws David in. The monarch eats it up.



Why? Because it's about someone else. Who *doesn't like* coming to church and hearing the pastor really lay it down all over *those other people*? You know what I mean: we *love* getting ourselves worked up in a lather over what President Trump said on that bus or how

¹ *Nathan Admonishing David*, Rembrandt (1650-55)

President Clinton behaved with “that woman”; we can’t wait to show our contempt for the ways that George Soros or the Koch brothers spend their billions... but who in this room wants all of *your* dirty laundry made public? Who’s ready to share your browsing history, your tax returns or checkbook, or publicly reveal the conversations you thought to be private?

David, along with most of us, prefers that old time religion – where we get all fired up with righteous indignation about what the other guy is doing.



And, apparently, Nathan obliges. He dishes up a story about two men. The first man is simply a stock character – a boorish, boring tycoon who has everything and more. The second man in the prophet’s story is the picture of tender-heartedness. He loves his pet lamb so much that he lets it use his own plate and allows it to curl up on the sofa with him as they watch the hockey game together. Well, as you heard, the rich man wants to organize a little barbeque for a visitor so he sends for and takes the lamb that belongs to his poorer neighbor. You may have guessed this, but the word for “took” that is used in verse 4 to describe the action of the wealthy neighbor is the same one used in chapter 11 to tell us what David did to Bathsheba.

David is blinded by self-righteous anger, though, and it boils up inside of him. He is appalled, indignant, and ready to make things right. He’s the king, for crying out loud, and he’s going to give that wealthy and powerful man what’s coming to him! “Take me to this guy!”, David screams. “I’ll settle this!”

Nathan continues to speak for YHWH, and now it is his turn to raise his voice: “You want to know who that man is? I’ll tell you – You are the man!” Two simple words in Hebrew – *’attah ha’is*–bring David the most potent accusation he’s ever faced.

Before we consider David’s actions or reactions, think for

just a moment about what Nathan has done here. He walks into a private meeting with a leader who has unbridled power and only recently has had several men put to death for inconveniencing him; he's played fast and loose with his authority and power in so many ways. Nathan could have been, and should have been scared to death... but he tells David the truth about himself anyway... Because of his great love for David, his great love for YHWH, and his great love for the community, Nathan tells the truth.

And you heard how he lays out YHWH's case against David. I anointed you, says YHWH, and you acted like you were in charge. I gave... and you *took*. And now you have set into motion a series of events that are all connected – they are all consequential – and the dominoes will fall one after another. It will be neither pretty nor easy. You will face shame and pain and your family will not be spared either. This is a hard, hard truth that the prophet is sent to reveal.



²And just as Nathan brought the accusation with two words, now the king slumps in his chair and utters two words that tell us a great deal about who he is and who he wants to be. “*Hata’ti lyhwh.*” “I have sinned against the Lord.” It may sound cringeworthy, but believe it or not, this is the Gospel story showing up in David’s narrative today.

Often, we think of confession as a devastating and humiliating act of groveling and self-loathing. “I know, I know... I’m a terrible person who does horrible things... I’m so ashamed... I’m nothing but dirt... I’ll do better next time...” But I think that David’s confession – and that yours and mine, too – can be so much more than that.

In the fifth century, a man named Augustine was teaching

² *The Sorrow of King David*, William Brassey Hole (1846-1917)

about Christianity in North Africa. As he considered the impact of sin and brokenness in the world, it struck him that if not for his sin, he would have no reason to have turned towards his savior. The more he thought about that, the more excited he got until he scribbled down on his scroll the phrase *Felix culpa* – “O happy sin!” Augustine says that when I see and recognize my own sinfulness, I am in a position to turn to God and seek the healing that I have always needed, now that I am more deeply aware than ever of my desperate situation. For example, let’s say that you fall and break your leg. That’s horrible. Until you get into the hospital and they give you the whole work-up and discover that not only do you have a broken leg, but you have an aneurism that’s about to burst *and* there’s a shadow on the x-rays in your chest. Nobody wants a broken leg, but if you don’t break your leg, you don’t seek treatment and somebody finds you laying dead on the sidewalk in a week. Sometimes, breaking your leg can be a good thing. *Felix culpa*.

This is an important truth for us to consider today as we baptize young Marshall into the faith. Today we acknowledge as publicly as we know how that he has been born into a world of sin, hurt, fear, and pain. Some of this he’ll inherit as a result of choices that his parents, family, and friends have made or will make. Some of Marshall’s experience of these things will come from participation in a world that is too often characterized by sins such as racism or violence. And, you can be sure, Marshall will be pretty good at finding sin, hurt, fear, and pain on his own – we all do.

Fully aware of this, the church of Jesus Christ welcomes Marshall today and speaks of forgiveness and reconciliation – even to his infant self – because he needs to grow into an identity that is rooted in the awareness that those things are possible.

We hear this story in the 21st century because we need to remember that the life of discipleship is *not* built around doing our

level best to make sure that we never sin: that would be impossible. Instead, we are here to remember that the life of faith nurtures us to *recognize* sin and teaches us how to respond when we see it.

Listen: we dare not attempt to raise Marshall nor any of our other children with the expectation that they will make it to adulthood sin-free. We are not training them to tiptoe around the edges of the world, stridently avoiding sin and always doing good, making sure that they measure up to the standards of perfection and flawlessness that some image of God might demand. If we do that, we are creating a climate of judgmentalism and shame and fear; worship will become an exercise in moralism or condemnation, at the heart of which lies an inability to be honest with ourselves or each other... “if those people knew what I was really like...”

But, thanks be to God, or maybe I should say *felix culpa*, I have the gift of confession. I see sin and I name it, which leads me to a place where I can remember (again) that I am not God and that I have not been called to moral or ethical perfection. I am, instead, called to obedience and faithfulness.

In the isolation and fear and shame that moralism brings, I want sin to be about *you*, or about anyone other than me. His greed. Her promiscuity. Their violence. There is something in me that wants you to be worse than me so I’m not all that bad by comparison.

But that’s not helpful. And it’s not the truth. And it’s not the Gospel. When Eugene Peterson writes about this story, he says,

This is the gospel focus: *you* are the man; *you* are the woman. The gospel is never about somebody else; it’s always about you, about me. The gospel is never a truth in general; it’s always a truth in specific. The gospel is never a commentary on ideas or culture or conditions;

it's always about actual persons, actual pain, actual trouble, actual sin: you, me; who you are and what you've done; who I am and what I've done.³

The gospel – and truth – is painful, but it leads me to grace, reconciliation, and healing that would be impossible without the recognition that God is God and I am not.

As we hear this difficult scripture this morning, I would ask you to remember at least three things.

Remember that your primary identity is not that of shame or fear. We see sin, and we are called to remember that our deeper identity is hidden with God in Christ. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. We are shaped in the image of God. We are participants in the Divine nature. That's who we are. What we do? Well, sometimes what we do doesn't match up with who we are. When we notice that, we are called to lay those things down and begin anew in reclaiming our birthright as children of God.

And because none of us has perfect perspective, we all need to remember the importance of having a Nathan in our lives. Who will tell you the truth about yourself, even when you don't want to hear it?

Some years ago I got a call from a friend who lives about four hours away. "I really need to see you, and soon," she said. "What's going on?" I replied. "I can't really talk about it on the phone, but it's important. Can you get here?" Well I love my friend, and I'd do anything to help her. She needed me? I was in the car within a week. I rushed into the coffee shop where she was waiting for me. "What's the problem?" I asked, in my best and most concerned Pastor Dave voice.

And she laid it on me. I mean, she went Nathan all over me.

³ *Leap Over A Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians* (HarperCollins paperback 1998, p. 185). I am deeply indebted to Peterson for his treatment of this entire passage.

She told me some unpleasant truths about myself – and she told them to me in a way that made me glad to have heard them, if you can believe it. And because she loved me enough to tell me the truth, I was able to recognize my sin and step into what was more clearly the light of grace.

Do you remember that you need someone like that in your life? Someone who will help you identify the landmines that you are unable to see or willing to ignore? I'm pretty sure that's a prime reason we are called together, beloved... to learn how to be in relationships that allow us to hear those things about ourselves...

And the last thing I'd like you to remember is that you need to be willing to bear truth into the lives of those who are around you. Now, there are some important warnings with this. First, don't presume to think that you can speak truth into someone else's life if you are unwilling to admit anyone into your own. That's a recipe for failure. And just as critically, remember that truth shared in this context is always a gift. Truth pointing to reconciliation and forgiveness is always a *benedictio* – a “good word”. I do not dare speak a word of correction or advice or truth to you, nor you to me, unless we recognize that it is a blessing: a holy and beautiful, if heavy, gift. You are always true *with* someone you love, or *for* them. You are never true *at* them or *on* them.

David's sin brought him to the place where he could realize that what he needed more than anything else was the love of God in his heart and the hand of God in his life. He needed that more than he needed the power and prestige of the kingship. He needed that more than he needed to look good and strong and holy in front of the community. He needed that more than he needed the companionship of Bathsheba or his dominance over Uriah. David needed to know that God was close. That God was forgiving. That God was already in the future, reconciling all things to himself.

David's sin taught him all of those things, and more. And it launched him toward the grace of God.

So the next time you wake up feeling as though *you* have done the unimaginable; when you are feeling lower than low because of a situation you have brought upon yourself, may you, too, learn to see God in Christ moving toward us in the places of our brokenness so that we are free to live into our best, God-created, identities. Thanks be to God. Amen.