

We have two fairly long readings this morning, but they are connected in that the first tells what happens, and the second tells the consequences. The main character is King David, the measure of greatness to this day in the history of Israel. We recall a thousand years after David’s reign, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which Luke calls the city of David, and Jesus was greeted as a son of David when he rode a donkey into Jerusalem.

The wonder of our Scriptures, and the Hebrew Scriptures in particular, is the willingness not to cover up the doubts and questions, the weaknesses and warts, of even its noblest leaders. The psalmists pose questions to God, and the likes of Moses and Jeremiah initially resist the call to lead or prophesy. This morning, it is King David whose fallibility is revealed, and the first verse of our II Samuel 11 lesson sets up the story:

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

David stayed home, and we might say he had time on his hands. The story continues.

²*It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king’s house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful.* ³*David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, “This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.”* ⁴*So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house.* ⁵*The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, “I am pregnant.”*

At this point, we have what might be called a “situation.” Yet, David is king, and has control, and believes the solution is to have Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband, return home immediately and be with his wife. The story continues.

⁶*So David sent word to Joab [his general], “Send me Uriah the Hittite.” And Joab sent Uriah to David.* ⁷*When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going.* ⁸*Then David said to Uriah, “Go down to your house, and wash your feet.” Uriah went out of the king’s house, and there followed him a present from the king.* ⁹*But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king’s house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house.* ¹⁰*When they told David, “Uriah did not go down to his house,” David said to Uriah, “You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?”* ¹¹*Uriah said to David, “The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing.”*

Let's pause again and notice what we have here. A king who did not go with his troops to battle, but stayed home; and a soldier who feels such a kinship loyalty to his fellow soldiers, he will not allow himself the pleasures of his own home life, even at the order of the king. The story continues with David trying one more tactic to have Uriah go be with Bathsheba.

¹²*Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, ¹³David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.*

David's second plot also fails. The story continues.

¹⁴*In the morning David wrote a letter to [his general] Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. ¹⁵In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die."*

We will return to the consequences of this final action in a minute, but for now I think of David on his rooftop, the way we might look out from a front porch of our house, understanding most people have rear decks these days. Over twenty years ago, Tracy Lawrence sang a song with the refrain "If the world had a front porch like we had back then, We'd still have our problems but we'd all be friends..." and includes such lines as, "It was where Granddaddy taught me how to cuss and how to pray."

I remember that it was from his large front porch that my grandfather would watch the events of his tree-lined city street in Albany, New York. After a paralyzing stroke, he spent even more time on his porch. People would wave to him from the sidewalk, with some even taking time to come onto the porch to talk.

During my visits with him, he would share health and family concerns of old neighbors, complaints about kids he thought too rambunctious, and suspicions about new neighbors. For better or worse, my grandfather kept track of the comings and goings of the neighborhood from his front porch.

Of course, our world is no longer just what we see from the porch. Now, through the power of the media, our neighborhood is the world. So, for better or worse, we have moved our keeping track of the comings and goings of the world from our public front porches to our private recliners. We sit and watch and hear about horrors and terrors, particularly to innocents, and may find ourselves saying, "I can't believe people would do such things to other people." At the sight of some images, I believe profoundly, I have seen evil.

As we read the next section of the saga of David and Bathsheba and Uriah, we will hear King David also knew evil when he heard it. I imagine the prophet Nathan being welcomed onto David's front porch the way my grandfather welcomed a neighbor onto his. Though it sounds like a factual report on someone's wrongdoing, Nathan is actually telling a parable. Let us listen to God's word to David, and to us, in II Samuel 11:26-12:13:

When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. When the [time of] 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 God and God sent [the prophet] Nathan to David. Nathan came to David and said,

'There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; 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. 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.'

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; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.'

Nathan said to David, 'You are the man! Thus says the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; 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. 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. 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. 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. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.'

David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.'

Nathan said to David, 'Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die.'

Nathan told David the story of the rich man and poor man with the skill of a reporter on the street portraying the innocent victims of war. With nine succinct words in our English translation, Nathan introduces the rich man:

"The rich man had very many flocks and herds; . . ."

Then, with fifty-three emotionally charged words, the poor man is introduced to David:

“. . .but the poor man had nothing by 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."

When Nathan's parable ends with the slaughter of the poor man's only ewe lamb, David's outrage was immediate – he called for the rich man's death. David knew evil when he heard it.

Or did he? Did he know evil? Or could David only see the evil of others? At hearing Nathan's parable, David appears to have no idea of the parallel between:

- the seizure of the ewe lamb by the rich man, and his own liaison with Bathsheba;
- the slaughter of the ewe lamb by the rich man, and his own arranged murder of Uriah at the battlefield;
- the devotion of the poor man to his only lamb, and the loyalty of Uriah to his only wife, as well as his fellow soldiers at the front.

In today's parlance, we might say, "David just didn't get it!" Yet, King David is not stupid. He understands the threat to his image when Bathsheba sends the message, "I am pregnant." He knows he must act, and creates an elaborate plan for her husband to return home, meet with King David to receive the order to go be with Bathsheba for a night before returning to the battle. Yet, even a gift from the king, and a drunken stupor cannot shake Uriah's loyalty, and the contrast to the evil David is more intense.

David is getting in deeper and deeper – for the record, he's already disobeyed the "thou shalt not" commandments against coveting, by his desire, and adultery, by his action. He is desperate. His skillful plan to cover up has failed, and he resorts to having Uriah killed in battle.

We can almost hear a sigh of relief from David when the messenger brings the word of Uriah's death. Once the commandment against murder is violated, David is seemingly back in control; in pre-DNA Jerusalem, Bathsheba's pregnancy can be attributed to her dead husband. A royal coverup has been pulled off.

Walter Brueggemann suggests David's actions were the result of his being either "morally numbed, so that he cannot discern between good and evil, or he is incredibly cynical, because he no longer cares to notice what he can discern." [Brueggemann, Walter, *First and Second Samuel*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, 1990), p. 278.] We continue to say, "David just didn't get it."

We sometimes say the same about leaders of government, industry, and even the church today. "They just don't get it." Just check the news, and there are reports of deception or outright corruption revealed: from a company outsourcing jobs to the head of a school group skimming money; from a town clerk giving favors to clergy covering up abuse; from a youth sports coach being overly selective to a professional athlete seeking a slight advantage. And we say, "They just don't get it."

Now here is the challenge for us. Friends, I would simply suggest it is too easy to keep our eyes fixed on deceptions and coverups at royal or corporate levels of power out there. For just as David deceived himself into thinking no one noticed his actions, including God, we can isolate evil to those out there and simply moan, "See how power corrupts."

So, before we perch on the front porches of our lives, looking over our neighborhoods, or settle onto our couches, staring at the media's world and saying, "Look at the evil out there"; let me suggest we try to bring David closer to home.

Few of us have not had times in our lives when we have uttered in desperation, “How did I get into this mess?” I am not talking about those times when we are left to clean up the mess of others after a party or picnic, but deeper messes in which we are wallowing. Few of us have not done something, and then thought we could fix or cover it up before anyone finds out. It could be a word written, an email sent, a remark uttered we would do anything to take back. It could be a planned deception or a private addiction. Gradually, we find ourselves deeper and deeper in trouble as was David.

Soon we are in so deep we cannot allow anyone to find out. We may lose sight of what is right. And while a Uriah might not be murdered as a result, perhaps we end up sullyng another’s reputation; or we allow blame to rest on that person who is blamed for everything; or we simply withdraw from others because we are so deep into a sin or addiction. We will do anything to avoid being found out.

David had thought no one was the wiser and he had gotten away with murder. He had forgotten about God’s knowledge of all things. As he stood on his palace rooftop, looking out at his kingdom, thinking he was in control, he welcomed the prophet Nathan.

Nathan was wise enough to bring God’s word to David in a parable. David knew evil when he heard it, and was ready to set right the wronged poor man whose ewe lamb was killed. Then Nathan revealed he had brought not only a parable, but a mirror. He held the mirror up to David and with four words changed the king’s life forever: “You are the man!” David’s coverup is now breaking news. David confesses, “I have sinned.”

Nothing will be the same for David or his family. The son Bathsheba is carrying, will die, but because of his confession, David’s death sentence on himself is commuted – there will be consequences for his actions, but he will live.

I would suggest, each one of us has been given royal power when we take on the name of Christ and declare we want to serve him. Yet, when we accept the power and responsibility of the Christian life, we may be tempted to sit on the front porches of our lives and pronounce our own judgment on evil. Oh, we admit we sin, but, like David, it is easier to view evil through binoculars – focusing on the sin of others – and not with a mirror.

Deep down, I suspect we know we need the mirroring parable of Nathan in our lives, to take us aside, and tell us, “You are the man!” “You are the woman!” “You are the one who has compromised goodness and justice for your own satisfaction, pleasure or gain.”

In our faith life, we can, in fact, welcome Nathan and his words of truth as good news.

- We welcome Nathan onto the front porches of our lives because we know when we sin it is better we know it.
- We welcome Nathan onto the front porches of our lives because we know God’s world is poorer because of our sin.
- We welcome Nathan because we can confess our sin and be assured of Christ’s forgiveness, freeing us from our deceptions and cover-ups – and also freeing us to reconcile with others.

- We welcome Nathan because as David's death sentence was commuted, so we believe we are given new life by the power of God's grace through Jesus Christ.
- We welcome Nathan because we know we live not to protect our image, but because we are carriers of the image of Jesus Christ, and by our actions – seen and unseen – we are the reflections of his love, grace and peace in this world.