

Unrighteous Indignation
Ephesians 4:25-5:2, 2 Samuel 12:1-1-15

“The thing David had done displeased the Lord.” 2 Sam 2:1 What did David do?

He saw a beautiful woman from the roof of his palace. He invited her over, had sex with her, and sent her home. *It was in the days when kings and other powerful people (and not-so-powerful people) did such things. Some still do.*

Full of fear, Bathsheba sent the king a message that she was pregnant. He did not think first of her fear. King David went into crisis management mode - cover-up mode. He brought back her young soldier husband from the field quickly enough for him to be “with” his wife. King David needed to avoid any public embarrassment. *It was in the days when men did not face up to their responsibilities. Some still don't.*

Uriah was a good soldier and Israelite. He did not even go into the house, much less into the bedroom. They are at war. The Arch of the Covenant, the presence of God, was in a tent. Uriah couldn't sleep under a roof. Even when David got him drunk, Uriah was not tempted to waver his duty for the beauty of his own wife, Bathsheba. *It was in the days when some soldiers were loyal and disciplined. Some still are.*

David had to manage his crisis another way. He ordered General Joab to put Uriah in the heat of the battle with the “valiant warriors.” *We know who they are, ...the ones on the front line who take the arrows.*

Uriah died as planned. He was regrettable collateral damage, a sacrifice to greater ends. Bathsheba came to the palace in what was probably described in the press release as an act of pity and compassion on the part of the King for a soldier's loyal service. *It was a time when even kings explain their bad deeds by lies. We still do.*

Here's what we know between the lines of the details of the history in 2nd Samuel - written intentionally so we will read between the lines: 1. David committed adultery, and killed a good soldier to try to cover it up. He knew exactly what he was doing! 2. General Joab was an active part of the plot, excusing his actions as following the King's orders. But he knew what he was doing, too.

3. Bathsheba knew what she was doing, too. But we need to see her differently than the other players. She was a woman in an age when women did not say “no,” ...to anyone, to husbands or to Kings. In a way, she did not have a choice.

And in a way she did. If she had been more like her good soldier husband, she would have remembered that the commandment against adultery was one the ten that even kings were supposed to obey.

NONE of this sorry unfolding of events should have happened, and they all had all sinned.

“...the Lord sent Nathan to David.” 2 Sam 2:1b

Nathan is a prophet, one who “speaks for God.” He holds a temple office, and he is an advisor to the King – *a member of the Cabinet for religious consultation on the Torah*. David is not surprised that Nathan appears for a ruling on a matter of Torah Law and legal conflict. It’s a public court, and kings decide issues that require interpretation and application of Torah, with the advice of their prophets. Nathan knows he will surprise David.

“... the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the 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." 2 Sam 12:1b-6

David is playing his role as King and Arbitrator in the public courtyard: “As the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die.” He is full of kingly wisdom and indignation over the injustice. He does not realize it, but he has confessed his own sin.

...Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the Lord, 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. 2 Sam 12:7-13

Not many of us have been around the power of kings. We have no idea how hard the task is for people in power - all the complex factors that go into making decisions that affect the lives of people, all the people, the whole nation, history itself. But we expect them to live by the rules they make (and the Lord makes), because deep down we have more trust in the rules than we do

in the people. We hold people in power to a higher standard - or at least we should. *We sometimes forget that we all should hold ourselves to a higher standard than we do!*

We are not surprised with what David did to Uriah. Things are not much different now. We are not surprised with David's UN-righteous indignation. Kings and politicians and politicians through the ages have sung that song like a favorite hymn. It is the formula for getting elected. *Be indignant about the opponent's sin. Never confess your own.*

We are in the middle of another political season, with more lies and withholding truth, with blame-games and cover-ups. "Tell them what they want to hear" or "Don't tell them anything" or "make the other guy look worse than we do" – those are the formulas for sure success in the vote. "Going negative" has positive results. The end justifies the means that work! The collateral damage to the nation is unfortunate, but the point is to get elected.

We are not surprised at what Joab did: being loyal when he had higher loyalties, following orders when he had higher orders, and saying to himself that there was nothing he could do about a king's decision except to follow blindly.

We are not surprised about Bathsheba, feeling like a helpless woman (or maybe using the invitation as an excuse to see what the inside of the palace looked like). We can't pass judgment on the why, but we can't deny what she did either.

These three people in scripture's tale of sin all blinked when the one of the Ten Commandments was right in front of them: Adultery, Murder, and False Witness.

We do not live in an age of kings and slaves, but we still see ourselves in them. And we have to ask ourselves questions, as if Nathan were telling us this story: Why are we so much like Joab - saying we have to be loyal to the side that is not as bad as the other side because we have no choice? Why do we try to excuse people like Bathsheba by explaining away the fact that they made a choice? Because we feel like we can't do anything about anything, even though we know we are lying to ourselves?

Are we like King David? He broke three of the Big Ten! Well, I don't think we have a murderer in our midst, but probably we have condoned killing as a social necessity. Maybe we have some who committed adultery at some time or another, or some who have been victims of unfaithfulness.

I'm pretty sure which one of the commandments is the most popular. We are in the middle of the season of bearing "false witness." Why do we listen to politicians who lie to us, to news networks that lie to us, to ads that lie to us? Why do we listen and not do something? ...Because we agree with the lies that we know are lies? Why don't we demand open truth from politicians, instead of listening to their excuses for not telling us? Let me take a guess. Do we excuse them their false witness because we act like them? ...Because we shape our explanations of our own wrongs to put them in a better light? ...Because we are willing to sacrifice honesty to avoid something like public embarrassment?

The difference between them and us is we sit in a sanctuary week after week and have the reminder that we need to face our own sins first, before we go “speaking for God” to others. We even pray each week that we are supposed to forgive others their sins as quickly as we forgive ourselves.

There is the way David is different - maybe different from us, and certainly different from our current crop of power-brokers. David confessed his sin in a public courtyard as soon as he faced it from Nathan. Our modern kings think they should never admit they make a mistake, because it will cost them votes.

David confessed his sin when someone was brave enough to make him face it. Nathan told David the obvious, and David could have killed him, too. But it moved him back to his greater obligation and his better self:

David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.”
Nathan said to David, “Now the Lord has put away your sin.”

Where are the Nathans of our national history? They have always been in the public courtyards, and they have often come from the temple. There was a time in America when churches played the role of Nathan.

A great 20th century American historian of church and state, Sidney Meade, described a time when the church played the role of conscience to the the nation. The church has always known that America is the “best-blessed” of nations, and it has never lived to the blessing. It has always thought itself “Christian,” and it has generally has been less than Christian to its own and to others.

Churches - denominations, congregations, ministers - have played the role of prophet. We have told leaders, “You are the one” whenever our nation ignored its own sins and accused other nations of evil it denied in its own life. There was a time when the church called the nation to do justice for the working poor, to educate children as an obligation of a civilized society, to provide public health as a necessity to promote the general welfare. The church started schools, built hospitals, demanded laws ending child labor in 7-day workweeks for low wages. Churches were at the front of the march for an end to discrimination by race. There was a time when churches demanded answers from politicians to questions they did not want to hear, and we were so known as a conscience that politicians were afraid not to answer.

The church did not do these things in self-promotion, or in some appeal for a return to the mythic illusion of being a Christian nation. The church was conscience to the nation, because every nation from Israel the chosen to all the nations since have always been “under God.” “We the people” answer to God for the way they live as a people. We answer to God for the way the nation serves all God’s people – which is not one less than all the people.

What happened? Have we started acting like loyal Joab and close our eyes to our faults? ...or like helpless Bathsheba and just go along pretending helplessness? Have we forgotten that David confessed his sins when Nathan acted as his conscience?

The call of Christ is more clear and challenging than any word that Nathan heard from God, and we are called to speak Christ's saving message of love and compassion, mercy and grace in every relationship of our lives and in the relationship we have to every part of our lives - including our life in the nation.

Whenever you go in to a voting booth, you make a choice. But it does not matter near so much as the choice you make every time you come into a sanctuary. How many of the Big 10 we have failed is not the issue at all. And since Jesus died and rose again to give us a new life in Christ, being righteous or unrighteous in our indignation or complicity with the evil around us is not the issue at all.

We are held to a higher standard than public powers are. We are commanded to be followers, and we are told that we must work at being faithful, we must become conformed to the image of God's son. We are called to play the role of Nathan when we need to, and we are called to live the example and pattern of Christ's life whether it is in the courtyards of power, or the offices of work, or the roles in our homes, or the voting booths and streets of our communities.

I still have faith that the church and we Presbyterians can influence the life of the nation in God's direction if we will act more like Nathan than David or Joab or Bathsheba. God has given us a moral conscience. We cannot take the gift we have received for granted, and we are accountable to the Giver.

I still have faith that we Christians are a conscience to everyone around us when we act like Christians in the decisions of our own lives, when we tell people we are trying to live to the higher standard that is set for us instead of settling for the lesser ways. Paul told the Ephesians not to grieve God, not to take the gift for granted. We have to live with our choices, too. Will we take responsibility to a nation that sacrifices its humble servants to secure the blessing of liberty to the already kings and powerful? Or will we live like the Nathans and Pauls and Christians, so that the things we have done don't displease the Lord.