

Sermon Proper 13 B
St. John's Episcopal Church
Anne Mansfield Minton

Today we have a continuation of the David saga. We hear first that the wife of Uriah is mourning for him. Now, there is a story here. Earlier in this chapter David sends his generals off to war. But David stays in Jerusalem and takes a nap. When he awakes, he takes a stroll on the roof of the palace. And, while there he spies a beautiful woman taking a bath. Actually, she was using the mikvah for ritual cleansing after her menstrual cycle, but more about that later. You can see what's coming already, can't you? David is used to getting whatever he wants. So he sends someone to find out who she is. When he learns that she is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, who, conveniently, is off at war in David's army, David sends for Bathsheba who comes to his palace and his bed.

And you could also see **this** coming. She sends David a message later that she is pregnant. Here's where the mikvah comes in. The child could not have been her husband's. It was David's. Since this whole story is told from David's perspective, we now know that David has a problem. No mention of

how Bathsheba felt about this. And, God forbid, Uriah, who needed to be kept in the dark.

So, David sends for Uriah and tries to persuade him to go home and be with his wife. But, Uriah refuses to enjoy his own home and his wife when other soldiers do not have that opportunity. Instead, he sleeps with the servants at the entrance to the palace. David tries again the next night, having plied Uriah with liquor, but Uriah does not go home. David's plan is foiled. Maybe Uriah had heard from the servants about what had happened and decided not to help David out on this one. But, of course, by not cooperating with David, Uriah was sealing his own fate.

David wrote a letter to Uriah's commander, Joab, telling him to put Uriah at the front of the battle lines and then withdraw and leave Uriah vulnerable and unprotected. And soon dead. And, to top it all off David had Uriah carry the letter to Joab at the front.

Of course, Uriah is killed in battle. David has solved his problem. Bathsheba becomes his wife and bears him a son. But, not everyone is happy about this outcome. Certainly not Uriah! And apparently not Bathsheba. Our story begins today with her lamentation for Uriah.

And two others are not happy. God and God's prophet, Nathan. The whole chapter has been filled with David sending people here and there and

sending for people and even sending a letter with Uriah's death sentence. Now God does the sending. God sends Nathan to David. To tell him a story. To get David to realize the enormity of what he has done and to repent before the Lord.

He tells him a moving story about the rich man taking the one small lamb of the poor man. The lamb who used to eat his food, drink from his cup and lie in his bosom. Not too subtle! And David explodes with anger at how someone could do something so dreadful. Until Nathan says to him: "You are the man." And David repents. But not before hearing the punishment that God will impose on David and the added remark that what David has done in the dark God will reveal in the light. And, indeed, the story of David's life, his wives, his children, is full of sorrow and loss. As time goes on it is David doing the lamentation, crying out in grief. And we are still telling his story 3000 years later. Talk about God's bringing it to light!

What we have in this striking story is a confrontation between a man who abused his power and a man of God who challenged him. David was enormously powerful. And Nathan looked him in the eye and brought God's judgment to him. Other kings might have killed the prophet for such audacity. But, David did not. This story of Nathan and David has become a

classic image in Judaism and Christianity of the right and the duty of the religious authority to confront and challenge and even condemn the abuse of political authority.

In 17th century France, during the heyday of the absolute monarchy of Louis XIV when the king domesticated all the nobility and high clergy and brought them to Versailles where he could keep his eye on them, there were constant references in religious writings to Nathan and David. It was only a faint hope within the French church in those days, but it was a hope kept alive that God's word and God's judgment is a continual challenge to political authorities. We see it in the 20th century in Archbishop Romero who challenged the government of El Salvador and paid with his life. In Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church in Germany standing up to the Nazis. In the Catholic Church and the Solidarity movement opposing the Communists in Poland.

We see it in our own lives in the times when we have challenged the use and abuse of power by our own government. As God's people, shaped by the Bible, we have an obligation to bring God's word and judgment to those who hold political power, and especially those who abuse it. This can itself be abused, of course. I think of the Taliban who, for their religious reasons are oppressing a society, denying people justice and education. But,

the fact remains that we have the duty to bring God's prophetic word to those who hold power. Our word needs to be discerned in community, needs to be consonant with the Bible and with our traditions and teachings over the centuries and, for us as Christians, needs to reflect the life and ministry of Jesus.

But, whether it is the prosecution of a war, or prison abuses in this country and abroad, or limitations on civil liberties or denial of health care to the most vulnerable or the administration's resolution of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians or on and on and on.....our obligation is to speak God's word there in that situation, no matter the personal cost.

Throughout Christian history we have often colluded with the political establishment. We have kept silent and let the powerful have their way. But, throughout all the centuries, we have had this story, this revolutionary story, to remind us that God's word challenges all political power no matter how strong, all armies no matter how fierce.

When David heard Nathan and understood what he said, David repented. What a dream that would be that the powerful, when faced with God's judgment, would change their ways. But, it is not for us to decide whether to speak based on the reaction we might get. Ours is to speak in God's name wherever we see that the work of justice and reconciliation

needs to take place. And then trust that the words we say will carry with them the power and the grace of God to change even the heart of the powerful.

So, I challenge us all this morning to see where God might be calling us to speak. Where God might want to send us. And then I challenge us to go and to speak!

And so to God whose power now at work in us can do immeasurably more than we can even ask for or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.