

**Indispensable Wit(h)nesses: You Need a Truth Teller\***

**2 Samuel 12:1-7a**

**Third Sunday after Pentecost**

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Joseph Heller's funny and extremely irreverent book *God Knows* imagines King David on his deathbed, remembering his long and adventurous life. As David remembers his life, he says, "I don't like to boast—I know I boast a bit when I say I don't have to boast—but I have the best story in the Bible. Where's the competition?"

Heller's imaginary King David is right—if he doesn't have the best story in the Bible, it's certainly one of the best! We meet David as a young shepherd boy, the youngest of Jesse's eight sons, secretly anointed by the prophet Samuel to be the next king of Israel. When the current king, Saul, goes to battle against the Philistines, young David alone is brave enough to kill the giant enemy warrior Goliath. After many adventures and long years in war, David eventually does become King of Israel. Indeed, he becomes the greatest of all Israel's kings.

David was God's darling. Handsome, charismatic, a brilliant soldier, and a wise leader. Out of a bunch of loosely affiliated and fiercely independent tribes, David forged a nation that under his leadership for one brief shining moment was NOT the punching bag for every other military power in the region. It was David who built Jerusalem and established it as the capital of Israel. He was a gifted musician and poet, whose words live on today in many of the psalms. Indeed, the most beautiful and beloved psalm of all, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm which begins "The Lord is my shepherd..." is attributed to David. One of

names given to the Messiah was Son of David, and for a thousand years the Jews waited for the one who would restore the throne of David.

Yes, David was God's darling. And he began to believe that he could get away with anything, even murder.

One spring, when his men were off battling the Ammonites, David remained home in Jerusalem. In the cool of the evening he was walking on the rooftop terrace of his palace. From there he could see across the tops of the other houses, and on one of them he saw a beautiful woman bathing. The woman was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of the soldiers off fighting David's war.

David was instantly smitten. He sent his men to bring Bathsheba to him, and he made her his mistress. Bathsheba had no say in the matter; David was king. At best their relationship was coerced; at worst it was rape. Eventually Bathsheba became pregnant, and only then did David get worried about the consequences of his actions. He needed to cover up his relationship with Bathsheba. He sent for Uriah to come home, and encouraged him to go and spend some "quality" time with his wife. He even got Uriah drunk to encourage him in his husbandly duties.

But in contrast with David, who seems to have been utterly controlled by his lust, Uriah was upright and honorable. He refused to sleep with Bathsheba. David, frustrated, asked him why not, and Uriah replied, "General Joab and all my army buddies are roughing it out in the fields. So, how can I go home and eat and drink and enjoy my wife? No way, sir, I won't do it!"

David shrugged his shoulders and sent Uriah back to the battlefield. But unknown to Uriah, the message he carried back to Joab was his own death warrant.

David instructed Joab to put Uriah in the front lines, where the fighting would be the fiercest, and then leave him there alone. Uriah is killed in battle, dead at the hands of the Ammonites, but by David's contrivance.

David then takes Bathsheba as his wife and can now claim her child as his own. That is where we pick up our story for today, as God sends his prophet Nathan to confront David with his sin. Chapter 11 closes with the ominous words, "God was not pleased with what David had done..."

*1 ...and 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. 2 The rich man had very many flocks and herds; 3 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. 4 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." 5 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; 6 he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." 7 Nathan said to David, "You are the man..."*

You are the man. You did it. You messed up. You are guilty. You sinned against God. However you want to put it, this is the hard truth that Nathan shows David.

Nathan is David's truth teller. He holds up a mirror and lets David see the truth of his own actions. If we were to read on to the end of this passage, we would read that David was stricken to the heart and immediately confessed his sinfulness.

We all need a Nathan in our lives. We all need a truth teller. I'm a big fan, as you know, of NPR, and particularly of the humorous Saturday morning current events show "Wait, Wait...Don't Tell Me." Not long after President Obama was inaugurated they had David Axelrod, Obama's top adviser, on the show. The host Peter Sagal jokingly asked him if was still able to tell Obama that he was wrong now that he was

president. Axelrod replied, sure. In meetings in the Oval Office he would just write a note and hand it to the person on his left to give to the President. Strangely, he added, the person on his left kept losing his job.

We all know—or at least we all hope—that Axelrod was joking, but telling the truth is not easy and sometimes it can mean risking a relationship. None of us like to tell a hard truth, because certainly no one likes to hear hard truths.

Axelrod may have been joking, but I read a more serious column on our new mayor a couple of weeks ago that speculated that one reason Mr. Suttle had made some major faux pas, including hiring an accused child molester for a major position in his administration, was that he didn't have anyone close to him that would tell him the truth when he was making a big mistake. I hope that's not true, but if it is, I hope that Mayor Suttle adds a Nathan to his staff ASAP. Maybe every powerful person in the country, maybe in the whole world, should be required to have a Nathan on their staff. Someone who can look them in the eye and say, you are going seriously off course here, and this is why.

We can clearly see how mayors and presidents and other persons of great power need someone to tell them the truth because they can get so isolated from reality, because people fear or respect them so much they end up telling them only what they want to hear. But it isn't just the rich and powerful who need a Nathan—we all do.

Now you may be thinking, as I would be tempted to think, I have *plenty* of people in my life who tell me what I do wrong, or where I'm screwing up. I have plenty of truth tellers in my life who are all too eager to point out my faults and make a list of my shortcomings.

But that's not really what a Nathan does. A Nathan doesn't pounce on every little mistake we make and go "Aha—you messed up this one. And this one. And this one." A Nathan only speaks to us about the big ways we are going astray, about the big ways we are harming others and ourselves.

And a Nathan is like E.F. Hutton. When our Nathan talks, we listen.

I speak often of my dear friends Diane and Barbara (they'll be here in October to help celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination). I said last week they are my Barnabases, my encouragers, but they are also my Nathans.

Eight years ago, Diane and I traveled together for four weeks through France and the UK. There were times our trip must have looked like Laurel and Hardy go to Europe. You should have seen us navigating our car through the back roads of Scotland, trying to remember to drive on the wrong side of the road, and—since neither of us has the least sense of direction—almost constantly lost.

We had a marvelous time, but there were times—usually when we were lost AGAIN—that were pretty stressful. Diane is the gentlest and most patient person in the universe, but I can get a best testy. Finally, in her gentle but honest way, Diane put on her Nathan hat and told me that I was regularly getting a certain "tone" in my voice.

The "tone"—which I get when I'm tired or stressed—is an unpleasant combination of condescension, smug superiority, thinly veiled irritation, and patronizing patience, with a strong dose of know-it-all and control freak thrown in for good measure. Now Rick had been telling me for years I get this tone, but he's just my husband. What does he know?

As my truth-teller, Diane helped me truly hear that unpleasant tone myself because I could truly hear what she had to say. I began to see how hurtful and destructive that “tone” could be to those I love, even though I never said any obviously hurtful words. The truth was unpleasant, but I began to work in earnest on controlling the “tone.” It was one of the spiritual tasks I set for myself after I returned from that sabbatical. And I continue to work on controlling the “tone”. Sometimes, when I’m especially rushed or tired or stressed, I can hear it coming out of my mouth. The good news is, thanks to Diane, it doesn’t come out of my mouth nearly as often, and I can hear it now, in a way I couldn’t before.

We all need a truth teller. We all need a Nathan. We all need someone to hold up that mirror that lets us see the parts of ourselves we would just as soon hide from. We all need someone to point out when we are going off course in a big way.

As Leonard Sweet, whose writing is the basis for this sermon series, says, “We will get lost...Let me repeat: We will get lost. We all lose our way.”(Sweet, p. 43) That is why we all need a Nathan. We may kick and scream and yell at our Nathans when they deliver those hard truths. We may put our hands over our ears and try to drown out what they are saying. We may deny and deny and deny that what they say has any validity at all.

But if we have the moral courage and institutional fortitude to truly hear what our Nathans have to say, we will come to bless their names.

That’s what David did. He could have had Nathan thrown into prison or killed. But he didn’t. He recognized the truth of what Nathan said, and finally saw the true horror of what he had done.

And then, in gratitude, do you know what David did? He named his son in honor of Nathan.

*\*Based on 11 Indispensable Relationships You Can't Be Without by Leonard Sweet*