

“Recovering a Place for the Prophetic”

2 Samuel 11:26—12:13a

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Many years ago, I read a book with the fascinating title — *Pathetic Protestant Preachers*. It is an exposé of televangelists, some of whom, like Billy Graham, come off looking pretty good, while others, such as Oral Roberts, justify the title of the book. They are pathetic in their willingness to deceive people with God-talk in order to make money.

And yet, while televangelists are an easy target for such criticism, there is a good bit of pathetic protestant preaching that takes place off the television screen. I have done some of it myself. And at least a part of what I am willing to claim for myself and many colleagues is a reticence to deal directly with the prophetic, the word of challenge we preachers are called to speak to the brokenness of this world.

We seem to have lost our nerve, lost the courage to speak the difficult truth, and this is pathetic. Many factors contribute to this situation. It is not all about preachers. Many congregations do not create space for the prophetic. While few pastors are fired for what they preach, biting criticism and threats to leave the church are not uncommon. And there are constant appeals to a flawed understanding of unity. Today’s reading from Ephesians pleads for unity in Christ but not at the expense of truth. Sometimes the waters need to be stirred. Yet the preacher who speaks a difficult truth will be challenged, and too often the threat of ugliness is enough to deter him/her from making the effort.

Perhaps today’s reading from 2 Samuel can help us. It is a sequel to the troubling story we explored last week about David, Bathsheba and Uriah. It does not resolve every tension created by the first part of the story, but it does underscore the need for the prophetic and it suggests some ways we might recover a place for it.

As the story begins, God is displeased with what David has done, and the prophet Nathan is chosen to confront David with this truth. It

will be a difficult message for Nathan to deliver and for David to hear. Nathan could be at risk. He is not just confronting the king; he is confronting a king who has just had a man killed for getting in his way. But this is a time when the prophet has respect, and Nathan has the courage of his convictions. So, he goes straight to him.

Realizing the goal is for David to hear the concern, he delivers his message indirectly, through a masterful story that entraps David. Nathan tells a story about a poor man who has only one little ewe lamb that he loves like a child and a rich man who has more animals than he can count. One day a traveler comes along, and rather than sharing any of his animals, the rich man takes the poor man's lamb and prepares it.

Hearing this much, David is furious! Before he realizes the true identity of the rich man in the story, he renders judgment. "The man who has done this deserves to die!" he says, adding that at the very least, he should pay back the poor man fourfold. At this point, Nathan looks at David, and with all the courage of his office, says, "You are the man!"

David is stunned, but before he can speak another word, Nathan proceeds to deliver God's judgment. David is the rich man in the story. He has sinned against Bathsheba, had Uriah killed — ironically in the same way Saul tried to have him killed — and then taken Uriah's wife for his own — pretty quickly, as a matter of fact, as if he has nothing to be ashamed of. So now, even though he is king, he will be held accountable. His behavior cannot be allowed to go unchecked.

If we were in Nathan's position, we would be holding our breath at the point, but David, to his credit, hears the message and takes it to heart, saying, "I have sinned against God." Because he does, he will experience a measure of grace, his life will be spared, but there will be consequences, the child Bathsheba carries will die.

This does not wrap up everything in a neat package with a pretty bow for us. What kind of justice is this? Why does the child have to die for David's sin? We don't even like the fact that Nathan equates Bathsheba to a lamb, a piece of property, in this story, even though in this time, she is property. But while we don't feel like all of the injustices of last week's story have been addressed, we are given a clear picture of just how important the prophetic is.

What might David's path be if he is not challenged to take responsibility for his actions? He continues as king, but there are consequences to his behavior. Undoubtedly, he is less cocky, and that is a good thing. But all of this hinges on his willingness to take responsibility for his actions. Would he have done this on his own? It doesn't seem likely. Left unchecked, David would probably continue on a destructive path and all Israel would suffer. Nathan's role, the prophetic role, is critical.

It is just as critical to this day. There are difficult truths that need to be spoken, often to people in power, because if they are not spoken, critical concerns will not be addressed. The economic disparities that exist in our world are near the top of the list, not just because of the human suffering involved but because of how often Jesus and the prophets before him address economic concerns. It's difficult to experience abundant life if you have no where to live and little to eat.

Even in prosperous Wake County, 8-10 % of the population lives below the poverty level, thousands live with food insecurity, and a thousand are homeless on any given day. But our poverty doesn't compare to third-world poverty. One slum in Nairobi, Kenya, Kibera, is home to nearly a million people, all living in cardboard boxes. Viewing this community, just a short drive from a nice mall, makes you ill.

There are things good people can do to help others in need, but these economic disparities, particularly on a global level, will not be reduced without systemic changes, and these changes will not take place without someone speaking a word of truth to those with the power to make a difference. Jesus does say we will have the poor with us always, but the second half of the verse he quotes from Deuteronomy (15:11), says, "So, reach out your hand to your poor brother or sister."

Racial injustices continue to plague us as well, and thus call for a prophetic word. Many of us have grown weary of hearing about these issues, because we are not the ones suffering, and because we think we have done all we can. But there is still work to do.

African Americans currently have 60% of the wealth of white Americans, but only 10% of their equity. Is this a matter of a less

industrious spirit and the natural result of a free market? No. It is the result of longstanding legal actions taken by all levels of government led by both major parties, as Richard Rothstein documents in his book *The Color of Law*. The disparities in wealth and housing are not *de facto*, they are *de jure*. For example, the federal government denied home mortgage assistance to African-American World War II veterans and thus made it almost impossible for them to build equity.

And there are other social concerns that cry out for a prophetic word — our lack of civility, our careless disregard for the earth, our toleration of violence, our politicization of COVID-19 which puts everyone at greater risk. But the church also needs to hear a prophetic word. We are experiencing a major paradigm shift for how church will be done. This was in process before COVID-19, but the pandemic has intensified the process. Being a part of church life is no longer a default habit for most Americans. That's okay. People in church now are more likely to be here for the right reasons. But we need to find ways to connect with those who don't want religion but have spiritual needs. Many strategies that can help require doing things differently.

So, the biblical story underscores the need for the prophetic and our experience confirms this need. The biblical story also points us in the direction of some ways we can recover a place for the prophetic.

First and foremost, there is a need for the kind of courage Nathan displays, a willingness to take a risk for what we believe in our hearts is right and just and true. We often think of people like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Tony Campolo as having this kind of courage, but we might also think of people like Marian Wright Edelman and Maya Angelou, an educator and a poet. I think of Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teenager who spoke to the United Nations about climate change. And I think of the poet Amanda Gorman who spoke so passionately at the presidential inauguration, referring to “a nation that isn't broken but simply unfinished” and saying “we lift our gazes not to what stands between us but what stands before us” and then concluding with these words, “for there is always light if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it.”

I have told some of you about a predecessor of mine in another setting who was greeted after worship by a man who did not appreciate his sermon on “the brotherhood of all men.” “You said something today I don’t ever want to hear you say again,” the man said. “You said that ... is my brother.” “Well,” the preacher said, “the way I see it, you have two options. You can convince me I am wrong, which I don’t think you can do, or you can quit coming to church here.” It may seem like a blunt response, but the criticism was blunt and unfounded in scripture. The preacher maintained a relationship with the man, but he did not apologize for the gospel. That’s the kind of courage we need.

Another thing this story suggests we need if we are to recover a place for the prophetic is a bit of wisdom and creativity. As we have noted, Nathan is astute in his decision to confront David indirectly. If we want to give witness to the truth, or at least our perception of it, and say to — you know where with the consequences — the packaging of our message is irrelevant. But if we want a message to be heard, if we want to be agents of change, the packaging is critical. There is no perfect way to present a difficult message, but presentation matters.

One other thing to note is that sometimes it is not what we say but what we do that is most prophetic — welcoming someone who feels left out, extending grace to someone who needs it, serving in our clothing ministry which meets needs and offers friendship. The prophetic is as much about lifting up those who are beaten down as it is about humbling those who are arrogant. We lift people up with words and deeds.

My theology professor, Frank Tupper, told our seminary class that a pastor cannot preach prophetic sermons often. Preach nine priestly sermons for every prophetic one, he said. Years later, when I was his pastor in Winston-Salem, I reminded Frank of this comment. “I said that?” he replied, “I’m not sure a pastor can preach prophetically at all.”

I knew what he meant, but I cannot give in to fear, and this church wouldn’t want a pastor who did. Your willingness to hear words of challenge — with no compulsion to agree — is another resource that can help us recover a place for the prophetic. But it is not just preachers who have a calling herein. All followers of Jesus do.