

The Prophet and the King (Part 1)

In reading one of my usual news sources this week, I came across an interview with James Loewen, who has just released a new edition of his book called *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. To a great extent, the lies he writes about in his book about American history are what we might call “lies of omission.” In other words, he argues that the versions of our nation’s story that we learn as children in social studies classes and history textbooks, and then often hold onto for the rest of our lives, have a tendency to leave out a lot of important details.

Mostly this is a matter of omitting the things we’re not exactly proud of—and for good reason. For example, as a child, I learned that Thomas Jefferson wrote,

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness ... [and] that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men...”

I also learned more recently that Jefferson also drafted language that didn’t get included in the Declaration of Independence, that condemned slavery.

However, I know now that despite his lofty words, Thomas Jefferson still helped create and lead a government that was not committed to securing those God-given rights for all persons, and that he found self-serving excuses for not freeing the men, women, and children he personally held in bondage. And in fact, a total of twelve of our presidents owned other human beings as property

at some point in their lives, including eight who were slave owners during their service as president.*

One of the things that makes the Bible—especially the Old Testament—both fascinating and troubling, is that the storytellers of ancient Israel were pretty unsparing when it came to telling their story. Parts of it are told in such graphic detail that there are sections of the Old Testament that are not, in most people's judgment, suitable for children. And that includes the stories of the many of people we consider the heroes of our faith.

Today's reading isn't one of those stories—but next week's definitely will be. But I've begin with these comments this morning to set a framework for sort of a mini-series of three sermons that I'm calling "The Prophet and the King." In fact, my approach today will make much more sense when we get to weeks two and three. And there are two parts to it. The first is that the Bible's model of truth-telling has important things to say to us about how God has chosen to accomplish his gracious and saving purposes for the world. And second, the Bible's example may give us some insight into how we are live faithfully among all the moral and spiritual tensions of living in that world. And so to begin, I'd like to invite us to look at this story in terms of its three main characters—Nathan, David, and the Lord.

We begin with Nathan, whom our text calls, "Nathan the prophet." Right here, something interesting is going on. Because up until the time Israel started having kings, the word prophet is very rare in the Bible, only used for a handful of

people.** In Israel's early generations, there was really no distinction between Israel's spiritual leaders and its political leaders, because Israel didn't really have anything like we think of as a government. But that changed when the Lord granted the people's wish to be like other nations, and have a king of their own.

As the story begins, David has been doing things that kings did in those days. He made Jerusalem his capital and he built himself a palace. Like other kings he wanted to make his capital Israel's religious capital, too, so as we read last week he brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. And now, also like other kings, David wants to build a temple, a house suitable to be the dwelling place of his nation's God. And finally, also like the kings of the nations, David needed spiritual advisors, and this is where Nathan comes in.

When David calls Nathan in and tells him what he wants to do, Nathan's immediate response was to agree with him. On its face it seemed like a good idea, so he just gave David a very broad blessing on the spot, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you."

But Nathan had rushed ahead and said this without doing what ought to be a prophet's, or a spiritual advisor's, first duty, to listen to the Lord. Nathan assumes that he knows what the Lord's will is. He forgets that even something that might seem like to him like the logical, sensible, even faithful thing to do might not be what God wants. But later, when Nathan is out of David's presence, the Lord speaks to him. And the Lord communicates that he has something very different in mind for David.

In this case it turns out to be a good thing. But in the bigger picture of Nathan's story, this moment marks a turning point, even a conversion of sorts. Because the time will come when the Lord will want Nathan to say some very hard things to David—and as we'll see when that time arrives he will rise to the occasion.

Nathan is confronted with something many believers are called to do. To use what has become an overused expression—he is called by God to speak truth to power. And it can be especially hard to speak that truth to someone who has direct power over you. It can be hard to speak up about moral or ethical problems in one's workplace. It can be hard at times for pastors to speak the truth of God's word as we best understand it to the people who pay our salaries.

It can be challenging when people who are called to be God's spokespeople find themselves at the boundary between church and state. For instance, how does one pray at a civic event? How does one maintain his or her integrity as a Christian while acknowledging that people of other faiths may also be present? How does one affirm God's blessings on a nation or a community without making it sound as if that blessing is an unqualified blessing? Should a person called to pray at a civic event dare to acknowledge a nation's faults? Should we, as some branches of the church teach, just stay away? Nathan's example, as we'll see more fully as we'll see in a couple of weeks, shows both the pitfalls and the potential of his being at David's side. But it also

teaches that it can be complicated and even spiritually treacherous for those the Lord calls.

We can speak of David's and the Lord's parts in this story more briefly. The groundbreaking thing in this story is that instead of allowing David to build a house for the Lord, the Lord announces that he intends to build a house for David. Although he doesn't use the word here, the Lord makes an unconditional covenant with David and his descendants. He tells him, "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever." For us as Christians this is a pivotal story. It's the beginning of Israel's hope for a Messiah that carried it through centuries of bad kings, and exile, and domination by foreign powers, the promise that God would send a descendant of David to rule over Israel—a hope that we believe has been fulfilled in Jesus.

But the Lord didn't do this as some sort of tribute to David's virtues. The Lord's message to David carefully underscores who's really in charge. He calls David "my servant." He reminds David that he took him from being a shepherd to become a king, and that he is the one who has cut off Israel's enemies. Furthermore, I've alluded to the fact that along with the parts of David's story that reveal his faith in the Lord, the Bible also shows David to be a shrewd and ambitious political operator. And we're a week away from seeing David at his absolute worst. But knowing everything he does about David and about Israel, the Lord still makes this commitment to accomplish his purposes through them.

At the same time, the Lord makes it clear that this covenant with David and his descendants isn't the same thing as a blessing on everything they will do. He assures David that when David's sons sin they will be punished through human hands—they will be held accountable on the stage of history when they depart from leading according to the righteousness and justice of the Lord, something that we see unfold repeatedly in the rest of the Old Testament and beyond.

To come full circle. We often look to history to be inspired. We look to our communities' stories to discover and affirm our deepest, most foundational beliefs and values. We look to them for role models and heroes. But in our well-intentioned desire to do that we can also distort those stories. The more we learn of the story of Israel in the pages of the Old Testament, the more we are cautioned against telling our own stories in ways that bury inconvenient truths or create a false nostalgia for times that never really existed. The more we learn about David, directly from the pages of 1 and 2 Samuel, the more we are cautioned against turning complicated, flawed, and sinful men and women into idols.

This isn't a matter of wanting to diminish that story or those people. Knowing and understanding these things leads us to a greater and deeper appreciation for the sovereign love and power of God—who has brought his salvation to the world through people like David, people who are faithful one day and unfaithful the next. God accomplished his purposes through a nation

that was in many respects like all other nations. And God continues to do his saving and transforming work in the world through Christians and churches whose stories can be just as complicated and contradictory.

From the story of Nathan we learn that the Lord calls his people to be his faithful witnesses right in the heart of all the complexities and contradictions of human life and human institutions. We are called, like Nathan, to avoid making easy assumptions about what is or isn't God's plan. We are called to recognize that there is no shortcut around the spiritual discipline it takes to listen to God and to try our best to discern his will. We are called, like Nathan, to navigate the difficult course of speaking God's truth in every arena of life.

May the Lord, bless, guide, and instruct us, as we discover the fullness of our story. May we learn all that it has to teach us. And may we always rejoice in the triumph of God's redeeming grace! Amen.

*Washington, *Jefferson, *Madison, *Monroe, *Jackson, Van Buren, WH Harrison, *Tyler, *Polk, *Taylor, A Johnson, Grant (Buchanan is believed to have purchased slaves for the purpose of setting them free) * owned slaves while in office

** I count Moses and Miriam in Exodus, and Deborah from the book of Judges.

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