

You Are The Man

The prophet, Nathan, came to David and said to him,
“There came a traveler to a rich man, and tho the rich man had many flocks
He was loath to take one of his own flock to prepare for the traveler,
So he took a poor man’s only lamb, and prepared that for his guest.”
Then David’s anger was kindled against the rich man, and he said to Nathan,
“The man who has done this deserves to die;...
Nathan said to David, “You are the man. ...
You have struck down Uriah with the sword,
And have taken his wife to be your wife.” ...
David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

Wow! Quite a story; it’s a classic, it tells us a lot about ourselves, about our faith, we need to talk about it. You may remember that in my last sermon— which seems like an eternity ago because covid got me and I couldn’t preach in July — I preached then on three biblical words, “Here I am,” and today I want to preach on four biblical words, Nathan’s searing words to David, “You are the man.” I also want to talk about David’s six word response, “I have sinned against the Lord.” For these two statements go together in our biblical faith. I’m not just trying to be cute talking about four words and six words, I’ve got a reason, and the reason is this. In our faith, theological language matters to our life, not because language alone, knowing alone, saves us, whatever we mean by saves, as if reciting the right words about God and Christ and church and salvation are what our faith is about— that’s such a bad idea — but because the theological language of our faith, when we deeply reflect upon it, can work to transform our lives — for the better I mean, for healing, for direction, for meaning, for purpose. And there are some words that are so striking, so profound, so faith forming, that it’s always a good thing to keep them rattling around in our head, for we need to live with those words, we need to continually open ourselves to their deepest meaning, to let them impact our lives so they can transform ourselves, our church and our society. For example, those three words, here I am, when we explore their meaning, suggest that God does not work apart from us, but works through us, though not coercively, so that we people of faith need to stop now and then in our daily life, and put aside the desires and distractions of our existence, and open ourselves to God, and try to hear, as we think about the stories, the words, of Abraham and Moses, of David and Ruth and Esther, and Jeremiah, of Paul and of Christ ... try to hear what God is calling us to do now, given the knowledge, the issues, the goings on, in our time. So let’s spend a little time this morning thinking about who David is, and what he has done.. He’s a king, of course, a remarkably successful military leader, conquering Israel’s enemies, extending Israel’s domain to its farthest boundaries, a charismatic figure with a passionate faith in God, a person so admired by the Israelite people that it was thought that the long expected messiah would be descended from David’s genealogical line. But here’s something odd, David is not a good man, there’s nothing in the multiple biblical stories about him that would lead us to think that he’s a good man, good in the way that Mother Theresa is good, or Martin Luther King is good, or even in the way that Joe Biden is good, or the way, when I was a kid, we thought that Albert Schweitzer was good, let alone, the way that Jesus was good, that is, good in the sense that the good Samaritan story defines what goodness is. David is not a good Samaritan., David is a person of strong instincts, with a strong drive to life, but he is not driven by goodness, he is driven by the will to power, by the indomitable force of this drive, by a will to a passionately vital life. The earliest stories of David, once we get beyond his boyhood killing of Goliath, are those of a leader of an armed gang who extort sheep and cattle from local farmers as the price of protecting them, though mainly what David protects them from is his own marauding gang, for David is not above taking not only an uncooperative farmer’s sheep but his women as well. For one of the aspects of David’s will to life, his will to power, is his

passionate love of women. David has taken many women as wives, has loved many women, and this morning's story of him is about his love for a beautiful woman, Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of his warriors, whose beauty he sees from his balcony, and sends for her, and ultimately arranges for her husband to be killed, and then takes Bathsheba to be another of his wives. Not a good man. And we should not forget that David, originally one of King Saul's supposedly loyal warriors, usurped the throne from Saul's line, though scripture glosses over that fact. That's not a wonder; most of those stories would have been written by one of David's courtiers, not Saul's. But there's one more essential thing to know about David's passionate will to life. He has a powerful sense of God's being, he has a passionate love of God; you may remember the story we heard a few weeks ago, of David's furious dancing before the ark of God, wildly, even nakedly, dancing, so that when his wife, Michal, saw that uninhibited, and what she considered a shameful, undignified, display of emotion, Michal despised him. So this morning's story about David is of a powerful, charismatic, vain man, full of vitality, not given to self-examination, abusing his power, and doing something unjust, more than unjust, terrible, evil, ordering one of his own warriors to be killed; and yet, also, a story of a man who knows he is living under God, who knows he owes something to that power which created him, who knows he is judged by that God. So when Nathan, so cleverly, so indirectly, brings David to the realization of the evil he has done, by saying, "You are the man," David responds, "I have sinned against the Lord." For what Nathan has done, with his little story of a poor man who has his one lamb taken from him, is to draw David out of the cage in which David has locked himself. For sin is a cage in which we are so drawn into ourself that our interests come to rule us, that we allow ourselves to be dominated by our own wants, our own passions, forgetting, sinfully forgetting, that we are by nature relational beings, that we belong to each other, that we are responsible to each other, and when we violate that responsibility — which we do, inevitably and universally do, for that cage of sin has a strong lock on all of us, the lock of our powerful drive towards pursuing our self interest above and even against the self interest of others. Do I really have to provide examples: just look at some of our political leaders today, think of some of the things said on social media, think of Putin ordering the bombing of schools, hospitals, homes, think of Hamas slaughtering, torturing, raping Israelis at a music festive and in their homes, think of Israel's brutal response, killing, indiscriminately, thousands of innocent men, women children, think of ourselves, who try to be good, but we know, surely, that there are moments in our life when we, like Paul, need to confess, the good I would do, I did not do, I did wrong. So all of us, some more than others, of course, some much more than others, we all need to have a Nathan come to us, with a little, telling story, to which we find ourselves impelled to say, "That person deserves to die," and then hear the response, "You are that person." And hopefully, we will respond as David responds, and confess, "I have sinned against the Lord."

For there is good news, gospel, in that saying, "I have sinned against the Lord," gospel implicit in the David story, gospel made explicit by our Lord, Jesus Christ. For we find the honesty, the courage, to acknowledge the wrongs we have done and confess those sins before the Lord because we know, consciously or unconsciously, we know that the Lord, the very creator of our being to whom we owe our life, that Lord is merciful, forgiving; that Lord will not abandon us; that Lord will continue to give us the courage to be, the courage to affirm the goodness of life, to continue to love life, despite the darkness we find in ourselves and in others; and that Lord will continue to draw us towards overcoming our divisiveness, towards living responsible towards each other; for we know, in faith we know, deep down we know, that we belong to each other. For that is our faith, our New Testament faith, our biblical faith, that God is love, that we are meant for love, and that love is not some impossible ideal held over us, but it is who we are, who we are meant to be; and now we know, in our time, as we have developed enormously destructive weapons, and as climate change threatens life itself, that love alone — the feeling that we are responsible for all of us — that love alone, love which is merciful, forgiving, creative, transforming, unifying, love alone will save us from destroying ourselves. Praise be then to God, who is merciful to us. Praise be then to God who is with us to the end.