

“Speaking Truth To Power” – 2 Sam 11:26

Well, just like TV serials, we begin today with “In our last episode ...” Those of you who were here last week may remember that our Old Testament reading provided for us a lurid drama, the beginning of the tale of David and Bathsheba. If you weren’t here and/or you don’t remember the details, in our last episode King David spies Bathsheba bathing and is struck by her beauty. Even though he is advised that she is the wife of Uriah, one of his soldiers, David summons her, “lies with her” as the NRSV delicately puts it, and she goes home. David then hears from her that she is pregnant, and so he summons Uriah home in the hope that the paternity of the child might point to him instead of David. However Uriah, faithful soldier and servant that he is, declines to go home and sleep with Bathsheba, and so David sends – via Uriah’s hand, no less, orders to his General Joab to have Uriah put in the front lines to be killed, which he was.

In today’s episode, the story unfolds, beginning with what might be seen as David “doing the right thing by Bathsheba”, namely taking her as wife – a much better status than mere widow. However, things go rapidly off the rails for David, not surprising when we hear that “the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.” We’ll find out both this week and next week just how displeased the Lord was.

The Lord communicated his displeasure in the usual way – through the pronouncement of a prophet, in this case a fellow named Nathan. That was – and is – the classic role of a prophet, a person who acts as a spokesperson for God, pronouncing verbally the words that God has directed the prophet to speak. This is a far different role than the common misunderstanding of a prophet as being a “diviner of the future” or some other kind of mystic. Yes, there often is an element of outlining what God declares he intends to do, but that is not the same as trying to guess the future.

Now being a prophet in ancient Israel was a very dangerous calling. The key test was whether or not the words of the prophet were believed and seen to be borne out in life; those who failed the test were stoned to death. So we shouldn’t be too surprised to hear Nathan approach the throne of David to speak truth to him with a very clever maneuver, the parable about the rich man stealing the ewe lamb. David was indignantly outraged at this injustice, and pronounced a kingly verdict of the death penalty on whoever would do such a dastardly deed. We of course recognize what is happening and relish the irony of it all, especially when Nathan responds to David’s outburst with “you da man!” ... well, more like “you are the man in the parable who has done hideous stuff” but either way David convicts himself and Nathan can now proceed to speak truth to power.

Doing that, speaking truth to power, is still a dangerous activity and yet is needed these days as much as ever. In many parts of the world where dictators and one-party governments rule, openly challenging their actions can cause challengers – and their families – to simply disappear, never to be heard from or about again. Here in Canada things are more civilized, however, and so the dangers of speaking truth to power are more likely to have you ostracized or financially penalized than to disappear. It does seem that the closer you are to the seat of power the more dangerous it is to criticize – you might then lose your cabinet post and all the nice perks that go with that job. However, it is easy to fall out of favour at almost any level or in any area – if you are not “on board” in a corporation, or protesting the decisions of club officers, or challenging how things are done in churches you are still subject to suffering penalties.

We live in an age when the truth is often a casualty, and it also seems the greater the position of power the more likely truth will be damaged. Corporate and political leaders alike employ “spin doctors” to ensure that the version of truth that is proclaimed is what the hearers want to hear rather than fairly representing the facts of the situation. I suppose we can’t be too hard on the politicians, because they are merely doing what the electorate wants – any politician

who utters a clear and accurate statement about how things are will never get elected. They are forced by the voting public to make promises they know they have no chance of keeping, because that's what the people want to hear.

Truth is often painful and often divisive, and few people want to hear it. But just because a message is painful does not mean it is the truth, a fact that people – especially those who believe their version of truth is the real, true version – often forget. Increased zeal in proclaiming 'truth' does not make what is being proclaimed any more truthful, and those who would claim to be prophets need to clearly understand the true role of a prophet which is to convey God's words to the intended audience, be it the people or the people in power. They need to understand that it is a very profound act in the eyes of God to proclaim, "thus says the Lord."

And such was the proclamation from Nathan to David, after getting him to see the wrong that he had done. "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel" Nathan declares – twice here. The first time God speaks through Nathan and points out to David all that he had done for him: anointed him king, rescued him from Saul, gave him all the treasures and spoils that came with that position of power and would have easily done twice as much. And then God tells David exactly why he is displeased; not only for stealing Bathsheba from Uriah but more so for the devilish way in which David had Uriah killed, setting him up to be killed by the enemy. For that horrible misuse of the sword God declares that "the sword shall never depart from your house."

Then again comes the affirmation of a true prophetic utterance, "thus says the Lord" and this time the sentence against David is made clearer, with a promise that his household will be the source of ongoing troubles, and it all will be done in public as compared to the secretive actions of David.

Again, since we are at the end of episode two of an ongoing drama, we will have to wait until next week to see the grace of God at work in this particular story (or as CNN puts it, "we'll feature this right after we come back!") We do however get a teaser, as today's episode ends with David repenting, and declaring to God's messenger Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." Next week we will see God's reaction, and how this particular piece of the story unfolds.

Because of our faith, however, we do know how the longer story of God's grace unfolds, with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the Ephesians reading we hear some clues about speaking truth in ways consistent with God's graceful gift in Christ. "But speaking the truth in love ..." Paul urges the faithful to grow together into Christ. He has been challenging the people of that congregation who seem to have been growing apart, being "blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness and deceitful scheming." Yes, they needed to hear the truth from him, a truth about conduct consistent with their faith in Christ, but they needed to hear it lovingly, in ways that would bring them together instead of driving them apart. We even see a bit of that with David and Nathan, as Nathan gently drags David into realizing it is himself who has done wrong and to the point where he can upon being challenged admit his guilt.

At the heart of speaking truth to power is the need to be able to determine whether a would-be prophetic message is indeed consistent with what God would speak, and to do that we need to understand what is important to God. It should be clear from all of the faithful experience of scripture that what God wants is justice, honesty, integrity, compassionate treatment of and care for others, especially the vulnerable. The prophet Micah states it ever so clearly, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Statements that embrace justice, are said in kindness, and honour God are indeed the words of truth that need to be spoken to power at all levels. May God grant us the wisdom to ever speak that kind of truth.