

THE SHEPHERD KING: REPENT LIKE A KING

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2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

Who doesn't like a good courtroom drama—whether it is a John Grisham novel or the classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*? Or maybe you just relish a good rerun of *Perry Mason* or *Law & Order*. On the big screen, do you still get a chill when Jack Nicholson declares, “You can't handle the truth.” The appeal to us of courtroom drama demands the exercise of justice, of wrongs getting righted, of the guilty being exposed. As we find in our reading for today, this human fascination with courtroom drama goes back at least 3000 years.

Back in the days of King David, one of the duties of the monarch was to settle disputes among their subjects. The monarch was like the Supreme Court—the final court of appeal. As we find in the book of Samuel, in today's reading, the prophet Nathan brings a case before King David for his deliberation. The king assumes this is a normal proceeding. Nathan presents the facts of this case to the king telling him:

In a certain city, there are two men. One of them is extraordinarily wealthy, while the other barely manages to make ends meet. The rich man has numerous flocks and herds, while the poor man owns but one little ewe lamb, a lamb that he purchased. It is important to note that the poor man had purchased this animal. It was not born to his flock because he has no flock. He was planning to breed the lamb so that he might increase his wealth. It was his future. He has cared for this lamb from the moment it was taken from its mother. It lived with him and his children. It ate of the little food they had; it drank out of his cup. He would cradle the lamb in his arms. It was like his own child.

One day, a traveler arrives at the house of the rich man, and the rich man is compelled to show this traveler hospitality. The rich man needs an animal to slaughter for a meal for the traveler, but he is adverse to sacrificing one of his own lambs. So instead, he just takes the lamb that belongs to the poor man. He slaughters it and serves it to the traveler.

That is the case that Nathan presents to the king—a rich man taking the lamb that belongs to another. And when the king hears it, he is outraged. He quickly identifies the cruel injustice of the situation. In his anger, David declares, *As YHWH lives, the man who did this deserves to die*. Of course, stealing a lamb is not a capital offense. It's just David's emotion and the obvious injustice that leads him to conclude that the perpetrator doesn't deserve to live. In the end, however, David rules in accordance with the law that dictates that a guilty party must provide

restitution of four times what was taken—in other words, the poor man should receive four lambs. David does recognize that the rich man had freely taken his neighbor's lamb because *he had no pity*.

David assumes this is a normal case on his docket for the day. But we know differently. We know the story of how David took Bathsheba like a lamb and then murdered her husband to cover up his indiscretion. And, in a “You can't handle the truth” moment, Nathan confronts the king and indicts him saying, *You are the man*.

We know that this is no court hearing, that it is a scheme by the prophet to illuminate the king's transgression. I imagine that the reality of Nathan's statement didn't register immediately with David. I'm sure the king was confused. “I'm what man? I didn't take that lamb. What are you talking about?” David doesn't get it.

Then Nathan the prophet speaks the word of Yahweh and reminds the king (in case he forgot),

I [your God] anointed you to be king over Israel.

I rescued you from the hand of Saul.

I gave you Saul's house and Saul's wives.

I gave you the house of Israel and of Judah.

Nathan's words are accurate. David is the recipient of all those things. As king, he should want for nothing.

Nathan continues asking, *Why have you rejected the word of Yahweh, and have done what God considers to be evil?* And if David hasn't deciphered the story yet, Nathan lists the charges against him:

You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword.

You have taken his wife to be your wife.

As we know, David stole Bathsheba and arranged for the murder of her husband Uriah at the hand of the Ammonites. After a brief period of mourning, David quickly married her.

Finally, Nathan declares judgement on the king telling him, *Because you turned from [God], from here on out, your house will be plagued with violence and conflict.*

David finally puts it all together and confesses, *I have sinned against the Lord.*

God gave David everything—he made him king and gave him a kingdom—and would have given him even more if he had asked for it. That is what makes David's actions so contemptible. It was unnecessary. He didn't need Bathsheba. He didn't even know her. He looked and he took. At the time, he had numerous wives and concubines. What he did was not just wrong, it was reprehensible in that it was **careless, it was casual, and it was callous.**

David's act of taking another man's wife was **careless** because it was thoughtless. It wasn't an act of passion. It was an act of boredom. He was just scratching an itch. Second, what David did was **casual** because he didn't take it seriously. There was no planning put into his actions. Whenever you receive an invitation to a party and it says 'dress casual' you know that means you can wear whatever you wish. There's no need to "dress up." In the same way, David's crime was casual. He didn't even see it as wrong until Bathsheba informed him that she was pregnant. Then it became a potential liability. His ultimate solution was the simplest for him—eliminate the husband. And lastly, David's actions were **callous** because people got hurt and yet David wasn't concerned. I doubt that he even intended to hurt anyone. He simply never considered the ramifications of his actions. He acted without concern. For David, there were no consequences to his actions. He could afford to be callous. Like the rich man in Nathan's story, David was careless, casual, and callous. As David summed up the actions of the rich man, he was *without pity*.

Then what comes next might surprise us. Yes, David confesses his sins, but that did not erase God's judgment. There were notable consequences to David's crimes. As king, he was above the reach of human justice. But God intervenes and declares that David and his house will not walk away without ramifications for his actions. As a result of God's intervention, David's house will not rule forever, and his family will suffer conflict and turmoil. And indeed they do. David's children will fight for the throne. One will kill his own brother. The child that Bathsheba carries will die.

The grand narrative of King David is difficult for us to embrace. We want to know how it could have ended like it did. What happened to God's anointed? How is it that the shepherd king was reduced to stealing sheep? The answer is sin. David turned away from God. David let his power blind him to God's presence.

The good news of this story is that it doesn't have to be this way. Sin can be averted. We recognize ourselves as sinners. Sometimes our own sin makes us feel that we are driving a race car with our foot pushing the pedal to the floor, and we're speeding down the road accelerating every moment. There are no brakes. We are delirious with speed. But we know the only way this will end will be in disaster. We will crash. We will be hurt. And others will likely be hurt as well. That is the nature of sin.

David crashed. He drove as fast as he could until he lost complete control. We assume that with confession, all will be made right. Yes, David is forgiven, but God still remembers all he has done, all he has hurt. David can't walk away unscathed. We don't have to be like David. Because of the God's grace, we are not trapped in a speeding car. God offers us the capability to slow down and regain control. We can repent. We can turn to God and ask forgiveness. We can be guided by the words of Psalm 51 which we read in our Call to Worship and our Prayer of Confession. *Have mercy on me, oh God... blot out my transgressions. Wash me from my iniquity,*

cleanse me from my sin. Create in me a clean heart and put a new spirit within me.
We may sin but we do not have to crash and burn as David did.

As people of faith, God offers us the opportunity to regain control, to put God first in our lives, to keep God in our hearts, to be shepherds in this world. As God's shepherds, instead of being careless, we can treat others with divine care. Instead of being callous, we can offer compassion. Instead of being casual, we can demonstrate concern.

We can follow the steps of the one who is our true shepherd, our true king. When we follow our God, we can handle the truth.