

# Picking Up the Pieces

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*Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)*  
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*Text:* 2 Samuel 12:1-19

I'm a sucker for a good fantasy series. I watched *Game of Thrones* all the way through, but George R. R. Martin seemed to love killing off all the good and noble characters, and making the bad or ruthless and violent ones win. Back in the early 2010's, a story with a moral arc that usually didn't bend toward justice seemed fun and edgy, but nowadays it's just depressing, so I'm not planning on watching *House of the Dragon*, the prequel. If I want stories about unscrupulous leaders who transgress moral boundaries, I'll watch the news. No, for entertainment, for escape, these days I want to see characters who do right, or who at least intend to do right, even if they make mistakes. I want to see them working and sacrificing for something bigger than themselves. This fall I've gotten into *The Rings of Power*, which is based on the Lord of the Rings world created by J. R. R. Tolkien, and it fits the bill.

But all this is to say that if I were making up stories about our ancestors in faith, I wouldn't have written the story about King David. Frankly, he's a liability.

In our reading of the Bible this year, we've skipped forward from the Exodus into the time of kings. The fact that the Israelite people have a king was not God's first choice for them. The Bible narrates a scene where all the people gather in front of God's prophet to beg for a king, and through the prophet God warns them about all the abuses of power they are going to suffer—a king will take your young men to run ahead of his chariots, and he will take your daughters to serve him, and he will take your produce and your land, he will take, take, take, and you will cry out and complain, and God will not listen to you, because you chose this for yourself. Fine, whatever, the people say. Just give us a king like all the other nations.

And God's prediction came true. The first king, Saul, turned out to be a cruel and oppressive ruler who stopped listening to God. So God turned to David, a man after God's own heart, as the scriptures put it. David is seen as the greatest and best king in the scriptures. In fact, in the gospels, when people want to talk about Jesus' authority, they call him "Son of David." But even David fulfills God's warning about kings. Kings take what they want, and others suffer. And David took. He summoned Bathsheba to the palace and did what he wanted, and how do you say no to the king? And then when she got pregnant, he had her husband Uriah killed. He waited until Bathsheba had observed a respectable period of mourning, and then he did the responsible thing by marrying her, taking her into his house to live with him and his other wives, so that Bathsheba and her child could be cared for. I'm not sure he really fooled anybody—it was pretty obvious from the circumstances who the child's father was. David's general, Joab, had helped carry out the plot to murder Uriah. I have to believe that people knew what was up. But they said nothing—who wants to take on a king? And anyway, isn't that just the way the world works? It's sad, but what can you do?

And in most cultures, the gods were on the side of the king. In Egypt, the pharaoh was even considered to be a living god himself. But even if the king wasn't

considered a god, he certainly had enough resources so that he could atone for any wrongdoing with appropriate offerings to his god. Or at least he could make some arrangement with that god's priests. Yes, in the ancient world, you wouldn't expect a king to be called to account for his actions. That's why what happens in this Bible story is so surprising.

God sends the prophet Nathan to David with a story. It's a story about two men. One of them is rich, with many flocks of sheep and herds of cattle. The other one is poor, with only one little ewe lamb, which he cares for as if it's his own child. When a guest came to stay with the rich man, he was obligated to show hospitality, but he didn't want to slaughter one of his own animals, so he took the poor man's lamb and fed it to his guest. Nathan tells this story as a hypothetical trial case. The unspoken question for the king, the chief judge of the whole country, is this: "What would you do? How would you decide this case?"

David's anger is immediate. Right away he explodes at Nathan: "The man who has done this deserves to die!" After a moment, he settles down. David puts on his thinking cap and remembers what the law of Moses says about the punishment for theft of livestock: "He shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."<sup>1</sup> That's what the law says, but David's gut-wrenching anger shows that there's a deeper wrong involved when the strong take advantage of the weak.

And now Nathan springs the trap: "*You are the man.*" Like the rich man in the story, David had everything he needed, but abused his power, exploiting others to get what he wanted. There is no need for Nathan to pronounce the verdict against David, because David has just judged himself. There's nowhere for David to hide, and so he admits he's done wrong. It's only through facing this hard truth that David's life before God can continue.

One thing we can learn from this story is that simply knowing right from wrong isn't enough. We're a lot better at recognizing injustice when it doesn't involve us. After all, David prided himself on being a fair-minded judge. He reacted instantly and viscerally to Nathan's story—but that sense of right and wrong wasn't enough to stop him from doing the very same thing he was so quick to condemn.

We all need a Nathan. We need someone who cares about us enough to lead us to take a step outside of ourselves so that we can see the truth. The scriptures tell us that God designed us for relationship. We are meant to be interdependent, and that means not putting ourselves in a position where we are the sole arbiters of right and wrong for ourselves. How many of David's friends and servants were part of his schemes? How many of them were in a position to say, "Stop, your majesty. For your own sake, don't do this."? Maybe that's not entirely their fault. Maybe David ought to have cultivated more honest and courageous friends. If someone gave you the level of power King David had, can you say that you are pure enough or free enough from self-interest that you too wouldn't have done something awful? If not, who's your Nathan? Is there a friend or a counselor who knows you well enough, who can cut through the conventions of politeness to tell you the truth you need to hear?

I have to confess that I started hearing this story differently after becoming a dad. I have to name something that leaves me troubled and unsettled. I can't get past the fact that David was the one who sinned, David was the one who did wrong, but it was his innocent child that suffered and died for that sin. I have a son and a daughter, and when I thought of David the father, keeping watch over his son's crib, giving up food and pleading with God to the point of exhaustion for his life, I could see myself there. I could see any parent there. I've done wrong myself, but to think of my son having to

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<sup>1</sup> This punishment is exactly the one spelled out in Exodus 22:1.

suffer for me is just monstrous. A friend once said to me that we ought to notice whenever we find ourselves stepping over bodies in scripture,<sup>2</sup> and I don't want to step over the body of this child without mentioning just how appalling I find this part of the story.

But I am not King David, and neither are you. My sins are real, my brokenness weighs me down, and I need God's mercy. I need to be cleansed and renewed if my life with God is to continue. But my son doesn't need to suffer for me, because God's own Son already has. Jesus is the innocent Son who suffers for us. But his suffering is different. It isn't something that's simply done *to* him. It's not as though Jesus has no say in what happens to him. Jesus' suffering is a gift he willingly gives. He tells us that no one takes his life from him—he lays it down freely. And because of him, because of the suffering of God's Son, God has become a parent like David who grieves and aches for a child. Through Jesus, God knows David's grief and anguish, and God won't ever again require children to pay the price of their parents' sin.

David knew that he'd done wrong. He knew his guilt. But he also knew his God. He knew the promises God had made to him, and he trusted that God was also big enough to get him from here to there, chasm of guilt or no: "Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; wash me, and I shall be clean indeed." You see, when you hide who you are, when you wear a respectable mask, it covers up your wrongdoing, but it also keeps you from seeing God for who God is. And when the mask comes off, when that searching light from God we've been so afraid of finally hits us, what God says is, "My child... There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you. Come with me, and we'll take care of all this muss. Come with me, let's go home." Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> This insight comes from Dietra Wise Baker, via Fr. Charlie Pinyan, Former pastor of Guardian Angel Church in Allendale.