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The Indispensable Road

2 Samuel 11:26 - 12:13; Ephesians 4:1-16

I was just pulling the car into our driveway when he said it: “*God has blessed me through pain.*” His sentence rushed like fresh air into a cynical soul: it was just then from my cell phone I believe I felt the breath of God.

Jim and his wife, Laurel, are a joy to our church and to what I know of pastoral ministry. I believe you have quite a few of your own kind of Jim-and-Laurel-type people: the kind of people that make you want to live better and love deeper; the type that take grace seriously enough to enjoy. In the trade, we generally call these kind of people “low maintenance/high impact.” Along the path of faith, you bump into them when God knows you need them most. They are the ones who spot silver linings in hurricanes and point out blessings when the rest of us might rather be cursing.

Jim had just returned from another visit to his doctors: the oncologist and radiologist. They found a spot on his kidney. This was after a bad bout with a rotten gall bladder, which was after a double knee replacement. “*God has blessed me through pain.*” He assured me after that sentence, after I caught God’s breath, “*We’re gonna get through this.*”

And Jim’s sense of blessing is a starting point on our path. God blesses *through* pain; which is not to say God blesses *in* pain or *by* pain: that’s just sadistic. Instead God blesses through the pain: to move us through it, to hold our hand as needed, to lead us past it.

David is feeling the pain. The confrontation with Nathan proves to be the blessing. *Isn’t David’s story ultimately about God blessing him through the pain?* But it is the pain of David’s own making. Of dreadful decisions. Of wicked actions. Of deceitful cover-ups. The pain of David’s sin – that’s just the right word. You remember the story: we’re at that fork in the road. David *takes* what is not his to have: the wife of another man, and the life of that other man. Adultery. Murder. And an unhealthy dose of deception. But Bathsheba shatters David’s desire for a silent affair. Her two word confession rocks David’s world: ha’rah anochi, said Bathsheba. *I’m pregnant.* With these words, the aging King felt the first sting of his stupidity, his sin. That only brings on more evil: David kills Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband: trying to clean the slate, David only stains it more.

To this point on the path of David’s life, the storyteller has given us at least 2 truths to consider: on one hand, *David is someone who seeks after God’s own heart*; on the other hand, *David is someone who has a mind for something else.* And this is where we meet King David – at the fork in the road – having abused his power. The cover-up is botched-up and as Bathsheba begins to show, so does David’s sin. But one more truth is beginning to hobble down his path: *righteousness and wickedness* are twisted sisters – occupying the same space in David’s heart, which points to the larger realization, a point the storyteller is certainly trying to make: righteousness and wickedness are hard at work in every human heart. Not just the ancient King of Israel...

The rabbis of old used to say this was the case from creation itself: each human has the ye’tzer tov and the ye’tzer har’ah – the inclination for good and the inclination for evil. Part of the power of David’s

story of sin is that it reads like ours...righteousness and wickedness exist in each of our hearts. But which one wins out?

If God does bless through the pain, Nathan is the one to share it. The parable serves to bless David by shocking him back to reality. That's part of the reason why a parable is so effective: *a parable is like a Trojan Horse*, Clarence Jordan (of *Cotton Patch Gospels* fame) used to say. No one is aware of the danger, the impending pain, until it's too late. Nathan springs the parable and like a Trojan Horse the story catches David with his defenses down. Nothing like the pain of conviction to offer a blessing.

And the two stories – David's account of sin and Nathan's parable of the poor man and the rich man – hinge on one word: David takes Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. The rich man takes the poor man's lamb. Nathan's parable is a subtle art – sharing a story that shines light on David's sin, a story that carefully clashes against David's abuse of power, but a story that does not have to be direct or indicting, because it compares evil for evil and draws out King David's own response. It's the best kind of entrapment: it's the most effective form of prophetic voice. Sin doesn't have to be yelled at to be called out. Nathan roles in that Trojan Horse. He weaves the parable so that King David might see in the rich man all that's wrong with David's own abuse of power: like David, the rich man sees what he wants, takes what he sees, consumes what he takes. David's story of blind arrogance collides with Nathan's story. *The man who's done this deserves to die* (David huffs). *He must restore the lamb* (David puffs). *This man has had no compassion* (David blows his own house down). And something like scales might've begun to fall from David's eyes.

Nathan applies the gravity; it takes one phrase for the pain of sin to sink it: *You are the man*. Two Hebrew words are all that make for an indictment, and they are enough: 'atah ha'ish. The story of sin now merges with the story of repentance; pain with this blessing. Nathan applies God's message: David has abused the gifts the Lord has given him and the trust the Lord has offered him. What's convicting about Nathan's prophetic message is also what is ultimately comforting. A change is made. A course is redirected. David confesses and the cleansing comes as swiftly as the truth is admitted. *I have sinned*, David confesses. And the restoration, the 'shalom,' literally, that David demands of the rich man in the parable is the restoration that God provides. The gospel according to Nathan is God's work to take David's brokenness to make him whole. This is goodnews Nathan shares: *peace* and *wholeness* brought by God's *forgiveness*. Now the Lord has put away your sin. God blesses through pain, even the pain caused by sin. Who among us doesn't need the forgiveness God offers? Who among us doesn't need God's peace, God's wholeness?

There is confession, catharsis, a cleansing flood, a change of course and a step in the right direction. Which is to say Nathan's story is the truth of *repentance* – a turn away from sin – and the truth of *reconciliation* – God turns to face our sin and to forgive it as we are willing to give it over.

The prophetic work has proven effective. Mainly *because grace precedes repentance*. That's how Barth spoke of it. Paul Tournier in his work, *Psychology and The Spirit*, puts it another way: *repentance does not reconcile us to God. Reconciliation comes to us by God's grace. But repentance is the indispensable road that leads us to reconciliation.*

Nathan speaks the truth in love – to borrow a line from St Paul. And isn't this what we should consider about this church, your church? St John's Baptist Church knows a thing or 2 about repentance and speaking the truth in love. Your name says it all. Who could articulate repentance and reconciliation better than St John, our baptizing forebear? *Repent, the kingdom of God has come near!* His first words smash open the earth and prepare the way for God's grace in Christ. "Repent" is the word you put into

practice as a family of faith. Your own story is a parable of repentance and reconciliation. It's the way you've ministered – as prophets and pastors – to Charlotte and to the world for over 85 years. Your mission shows the turn in your life, the change grace has made in your life. As I read your history, I see the parable of your prophetic zeal but with a pastoral soul. That's the nature of Nathan's parable but also St Paul's epistle: the dual work of prophecy and pastoral ministry. The unity amid diversity. Speaking the truth in love to grow up in God's grace in Christ. *Isn't that the truth of your own church?* It is what you covenant to do. Let me preach back to you what you preach into the world:

We will love and encourage each other in the family of the Church, and admonish each other as occasion may require. Our differences will not separate us but rather increase our understanding and strengthen the bonds of Christian love.

We will be a servant church, recognizing the infinite worth of every person and believing that Christ has called us to active involvement on behalf of human brotherhood and sisterhood.

For eighty-seven years, you've played the part of prophets and pastors. And as for your called pastors, your history is rich. Six pastors in roughly 90 years. Dr Gaines. Dr Durden. Dr Broach. Dr Cave. Dr Graves. Dr Kremer.

I'll speak as one who does not know exactly what you're facing. I'm the one who's on the other side – the vocational minister who on occasion hopes to be called to a people like you. Please hear me say I don't pretend to know what it feels like to be a congregation in transition – an intentional interim. I wish I had some snake oil or balm of Gilead, something to soothe the blisters you might be feeling. This transition time doesn't give much rest for the weary. I do know that you have ample care and compassion – in Warren, Lee, Martha and the other good workers among you. Just as importantly, you have each other – speaking the truth in love – serving as prophets together, working as pastors for each other. While we don't know what God has for St John's future, let's rest, even rejoice, in this much: you have all that you need to glorify God in this very moment. You have all that you need by God's gift of forgiveness for the glory of Jesus Christ through his conviction and your unity amid diversity. And you are not unlike David in this way: there's a fork in your road. The hope of blessing...through the pain of conviction.

The words of a Desert Father, a saint of the Eastern Orthodox Church, come to mind. St John Cassian some 400 years after Jesus' ministry on earth must've looked into the eyes of his fellow prophets and pastors. He might've seen hints of their pain and glimpses of promise and to prepare them for the road ahead, he said: *To cling always to God and to the things of God – this must be the road that the heart follows unswervingly.*

St John's Baptist Church: May your transition time be a transformation time. Along this indispensable road, may you repent and be real with God and with each other.