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Feelings, Facts, and Faith

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You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart (Psalm 51:6).

It's been a long time since we've told the story that, according to tradition, lies behind the great 51st psalm. The story comes from three thousand years ago, but it's a perennially compelling tale, so let me tell it to you once again.

The story begins like this. In the spring of the year, when kings go out to battle, King David sends his army to fight against their enemies, but the king himself decides to stay home in Jerusalem. Late one afternoon, David is walking around on the roof of his house, when he looks across the neighborhood and his eyes fall upon a very beautiful woman who happens to be taking a bath. David suddenly has all sorts of feelings for this woman, so he asks one of his servants to find out who she is. The servant reports that her name is Bathsheba—which sounds like a pun in English, but not in Hebrew—so David sends for her and they lie together, as the Bible puts it, and then Bathsheba returns to her home.

Before long, Bathsheba sends a message to the king: "I'm pregnant." By the standards of the time, that would not necessarily be much of a problem; since David already has a number of wives, he could simply invite Bathsheba to join them. But as it happens, there is a bigger problem. Bathsheba is already married. She's married to Uriah the Hittite, a foreign-born but faithful soldier serving in King David's army.

David knew Bathsheba was married when he sent for her, but when people are driven by their passions they don't

always think very far ahead. So now David has a problem, and Bathsheba has a problem, and David does what people often do when some embarrassing fault is about to be exposed: he tries to arrange a cover-up.

David sends someone to fetch Uriah from the battlefield. It's unusual for the king to send for any individual soldier, but as Mel Brooks famously says in his parody of world history, "It's good to be the king." The king can get away with all sorts of things because he has lots of resources and everyone is beholden to him. So when the king sends for Uriah to come home, Uriah comes.

David asks the soldier how things are going at the front. He makes some small talk, and then he says, "While you're here, why don't you just go home for a little R and R? Spend some time with your wife before you go back to the war." David gives Uriah a gift and sends him on his way. But next morning David learns that Uriah did not go home at all. He spent the night outside the palace with the king's servants. "Why didn't you go home?" David asks, and Uriah answers, "My lord Joab and all the king's soldiers are camping in the open field. I won't spend the night with my wife when my fellow soldiers are making such sacrifices."

David appreciates Uriah's dedication, but he still has this problem, and so he tries again. He invites Uriah to dinner, and plies him with wine to get him drunk; then he tells Uriah to go home just for one night and the king will send him back to the front tomorrow. But come the morning David discovers that Uriah spent the night again with the king's servants. He still will not indulge himself while his comrades are out doing battle.

Now David thinks he has no choice but to double down. He sends Uriah to the front with a letter to General Joab. David knows that his faithful soldier will not read the letter, so Uriah rejoins his unit and delivers what turns out to be his own death warrant. The letter says, “Set Uriah in front of the hardest fighting, then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die.”

Joab obeys the order. He puts Uriah at the head of a group attacking a city wall, and sure enough, Uriah is killed in the battle. Casualties are heavy, and that could reflect badly on the general, but Joab tells his messenger that if the king asks why so many good men were killed in front of the city wall, he should say to the king, “Uriah the Hittite is also dead.”

So David commits adultery and covers it up with a cloak of murder—and both of these sins are against a soldier of exemplary courage and faithfulness. The king waits a little while for Bathsheba to mourn the death of her husband, then he brings her into his palace; and after barely plausible period, the court celebrates a son from David’s newest wife. The king has pulled it off. One crime led to another, but he gets away with it. Nobody knows the whole truth but David and Bathsheba, and no one who has any questions will dare to challenge the king.

No one, that is, except the prophet of God. Even if David manages to fool or intimidate everyone else, God knows what the king has done. God knows the facts of the matter, and God will not let the truth be papered over with deceptions and lies. So God summons the prophet Nathan and sends him with a new message to King David.

I always picture Nathan like the old television detective Colombo. I see him in a rumpled trench coat, with tousled hair and a half-lit cigar in his hand, sounding like he's still trying to figure things out when in fact he knows more than he lets on. So Nathan comes to court, and he tells the king a story about something that's happened recently in David's realm.

“There were two men in a certain city. One was very rich, and the other very poor. The rich man had all sorts of flocks and herds, but the poor man had just one little ewe lamb. The lamb was very precious to him, and it grew up with his children, so the lamb was almost like a daughter to him. [And by the way, the Hebrew word for daughter is “bat,” but David misses the pointed pun.] Then one day the rich man had company, and when it came time to prepare a meal for his guest, he didn't want to take a lamb from his own enormous flock. So you know what he did, King David? He went and stole the poor man's lamb and offered it up to his guest instead! What do you think of that, King David?”

When David hears the story, he flies into a rage over the rich man's selfishness and injustice. “As the Lord lives,” the king declares, “the man who did this deserves to die. He shall restore the lamb fourfold to the poor man, because he had no pity!”

Then Nathan turns to David in the heat of the king's righteous wrath, and he points to him and says, “You are the man! You are the man, King David. And thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master's house, and ... gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do

what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites....’ Thus says the Lord: ‘I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house.... For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.’”

And sure enough, this first son of David and Bathsheba soon dies in infancy. Later on Bathsheba will have another son, who will become King Solomon, but the house of David will be full of strife and conflict and intrigue and death for generations to come.

Meanwhile, David knows that he was wrong. He let himself be driven by his desires and interests, and he used his power to dig deeper and deeper into a well of deception. But God sees the truth, no matter how we human beings rationalize our self-interest. When the prophet confronts David with the facts, he confesses his faults and repents. And David’s confession, according to tradition, leads him to write the 51st psalm:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.... You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me....

David asks God to help him be faithful again, where faith is driven not by feelings alone, but by fidelity to God and to the truth.

The story of David and Bathsheba and Nathan the prophet is timeless because in every age people are tempted to bury the truth whenever it conflicts with other things they want. In our own day, facts give way so readily to feelings and interests that some people claim we live in a “post-fact” or “post-truth” world. People can reinforce their opinions with sources of information that tell them only what they want to hear, so that truth itself is easily sacrificed to whatever people want to believe.

But there are facts in this world. Some things are true and some things are false, and neither kings nor ordinary people can get away with denying the truth forever. God knows the truth, and in every age God raises up prophets who are faithful to the facts, even when people don’t want to hear them.

The church of Jesus Christ is one of the instruments God uses to tell the truth. Jesus says to his followers, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” Among other things, he means that we will be free from the self-deception that so readily rationalizes our sins.

Sometimes telling the truth means calling things what they really are. An affair with someone who is married to another person is adultery, no matter what euphemism people invoke to minimize it. Deception is deception, no matter who does it, and lies are lies, no matter who tells them.

The hypocrisy of people's selective indignation is striking, as when King David condemns so quickly the injustice in Nathan's story but rationalizes his own, much greater, injustice with Uriah the Hittite. We see other people's faults so clearly, and condemn the sins of tribes other than our own; but when we or the members of our tribe do the same things, we're inclined to say, "Well, nobody's perfect, and we ought not to judge." And then, when our own faults or the faults of our tribe are undeniably exposed, we fall back on the feeblest defense of all: "They do it too." As if our mothers never taught us when we were children that two wrongs don't make a right.

Christian faith is, among other things, a faithfulness to the truth, a fidelity to facts, unrefracted by our feelings or immediate self-interest. "You desire truth in the inward being," King David confesses to God in his penitential psalm. He asks God to put a new and right spirit within him; and the church is only faithful to Christ as long as we ourselves are guided by that spirit too, the spirit of the one who tells us that the truth will make us free.



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