

Nested Stories
2 Samuel 11-12
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Here we have one of the Bible's famous nested stories. A story-within-a-story. A smaller narrative embedded in a larger narrative. Another famous example is in the second act of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the play, the guilty characters go to the theater - and their reaction to the events portrayed illuminates their guilt in the real world. The story inside the story helps us to interpret the story. Got it? So it is with our stories which are written inside a much greater story that God is writing.

Here we are approaching a climactic moment in the narrative of King David's reign over Israel. He is at the highest point of his power and the lowest point of his character. While his men are out in the bush fighting his wars, David stays back in Jerusalem. His gaze falls on an unaccompanied army wife named Bathsheba, whose husband, Uriah, is deployed to combat. She is soon found to be pregnant, which David clumsily attempts to conceal by drawing Uriah back from the front and encouraging him to spend time with his wife. When that scheme fails, David arranges through his top general, Joab, to make sure Uriah does not survive the war. Some interpreters call what happened between David and Bathsheba adultery, but a modern reading of the power difference between them leads us to conclude that this was not a consensual relationship. He has used his power and position to compel her into a relationship with him. Let me briefly recap the shocking and compounding transgressions. We have the original violence of the assault, then the deception in David's effort to cover up his crime, and that brings us to an arranged murder. Israel: this is your king.

The Prophet Nathan carries the unenviable burden of speaking truth to the king, whose actions by this point are destructive to himself and the nation. Rather than argue with David, he tells the king a story - a story about transgressive power. There's a rich man, Nathan says, who has everything he could ever want or need. And there is a poor man, with no possessions to his name save a little ewe lamb. Along comes a guest to the town and a meal needs to be prepared. Rather than take a lamb from his own flock, the rich man takes the one little ewe lamb belonging to his poor neighbor. Not sensing the trap that Nathan has laid for him, King David was greatly entertained by this story and moved to outrage at the injustice that Nathan has described. Whereupon the prophet Nathan turns the story on the king and reveals - "You are the man!" In other words, the nested story of the rich man and the little lamb enacts the larger story of David's selfish power and the destruction of Uriah. It does not require a great deal of literary insight to see how this embedded story helps us to interpret the original story. Nathan doesn't mention anything about sexuality, deception, or murder - but the story he tells about the rich man and the poor man and the little ewe lamb is about power. At the root of David's criminality is how the king has been corrupted by his power.

An easy mistake for us to make about this story would be to dissociate ourselves from King David's experience. I am not a King. I do not have David's power. I do not command armies nor hold the keys to the treasury. The sound of my voice does not cause others to tremble. Therefore - this is an interesting story about an altogether corrupted and violent man. He reminds me about certain strongmen I see in the news, but his position is so far from my own that the Prophet Nathan's insights do not apply to me.

But this story is not merely about how power can desensitize us to the pain of others. It's about how the king is unable to hear the truth about himself. And if our first response to this

nested story is to distance ourselves from it, then we might wonder whether we might already be seduced by the stories we tell ourselves. The Prophet Nathan doesn't lecture him or argue with him, but instead uses this nested story to draw out the king's hypocrisy. He artfully exploits our tendency to notice the sins of others long before we see the sin of ourselves. So if we look at David's story shaking our heads and wagging our fingers at him, then we are putting ourselves in his position. If we are outraged at David's crimes. If we feel self-righteous in contrast to him. If we dissociate ourselves from David in the way that David dissociated himself from the rich man in Nathan's tale - then the prophet is uttering the word of judgment against us. Don't you see! Don't you see! Nathan pleads. You are the man! You are the man in the story.

Now of course this is a highly gendered account. And there are readers of this story who are not men but women. People of faith and others who are in the position of vulnerability and exploitation, not in the position of privilege and power. What if you are not the man, but the woman? What if you are not the man, but the other? One shortcoming of the biblical narrative is that it gives no dialogue to the woman in this tale. Many commentators notice that Bathsheeba has no voice. But I think it's important to lift up how her story is nested here, too. The prophet comes as God's messenger. The story that draws out the king's guilt is the story of suffering that has moved God to act. So there is no dialogue for Bathsheeba - and that is why God has spoken such a powerful, terrible, humbling word to the corrupted king. "Thus says the Lord: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house." God's judgment - moved by Bathsheeba's experience - is the beginning of David's decline.

So however you're approaching this story. Whether you are the man or the woman. Whether you hold the power or you are subject to the power. Whether you occupy a high position or a low position - we have to remember that we are not the authors of our own story. David commits a lot of terrible crimes - but the sin is living apart from the story that God is writing. None of us live outside of God's story. We are all characters in a nested story. Our stories are inside the Word that God has spoken.

Bathsheeba's liberation is nested in Nathan's prophecy.

Nathan's oracle is nested in David's criminality.

David's monarchy is nested in Israel's deliverance..

Israel's life is nested in God's covenant.

We are all God's creatures. We are God's children. Our calling is not to be authors of our own destiny but to love what we have been given by God. So let us put down the pens with which we write about ourselves as heroes. And let go of the judgmental ways of reading others stories. And just remember that we are characters here, created by a divine author, part of a much larger story. Our lives are nested in God's faithfulness.