

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Sunday, August 4, 2024**  
**10am**

Text: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

Theme: Worship with Rejoicing: The Weight of the Word

[prayer]

The reading of Scripture, followed by the sermon, is the movement in our worship service that we call “The Proclamation of the Word.”

When I was in seminary, peers and mentors alike remarked that the purpose of the sermon is to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” I did a quick internet search on the origins of this saying and learned that the phrase actually originated in the field of journalism, not homiletics (the theory and practice of preaching). More than a century ago, during American journalism’s muckraking days, the humorist and journalist Finley Peter Dunne wrote, in the voice of his alter-ego Mr. Dooley:

“Th newspaper does ivrything f’r us. It runs th’ polis foorce an’ th’ banks, commands th’ milishy, controls th’ ligislachure, baptizes th’ young, marries th’ foolish, comforts th’ afflicted, afflicts th’ comfortable, buries th’ dead an’ roasts thim afterward.”<sup>1</sup>

Dunne was critiquing newspapers at a time when journalism had a lot of power and few ethical standards. The more scandalous the news was, the more newspapers sold. There was not much incentive to tell the truth.

Modern journalism, when it lives up to its highest ideals, exists to report the truth so we can keep our leaders accountable. This is why freedom of the press is enshrined in our constitution as a check against power.

There were no newspapers in King David’s day, but there were prophets and they also existed as a check against power. That phrase – “comfort the afflicted, afflict

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mr.\\_Dooley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mr._Dooley)

the comfortable” – neatly captures what a prophet does. A prophet is not just another word for a seer, someone who foretells the future, though the biblical prophets are indeed concerned with the future. But what they have to say about the future is always grounded in the truth of the present. Prophets assess whether God’s people are behaving in accordance with God’s word. The word in David’s time was the law of Moses. God sent prophets to His people to hold them accountable to the law. And the message the prophets usually carried was that the people had strayed from God’s word. Importantly, it was the rich and the powerful who had strayed by exploiting the poor, oppressing the immigrant, and leading the people into idolatry.

But their message wasn’t all doom and gloom. The prophets also bore words of comfort for the oppressed and suffering, and a vision of hope for the day when God would be victorious over all forms of injustice and set his people free from the bondage of sin.

[pause]

Our Scripture lesson opens with a pun on the word “sent.” Last week it was David who was doing the sending – sending for Bathsheba, sending Uriah away, sending messengers who arranged to satisfy his lust and cover up his indiscretions.

But now it is God who sends. And God sends his prophet, Nathan, to convey a message to David. For the thing that David had done was evil in God’s sight. Nathan was sent to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable – the afflicted being David’s victims, and the comfortable being David ensconced in his privilege.

We meet Bathsheba in a moment of intense grief, keening for her husband Uriah. The only voice she is given in this story is the voice of her mourning. In fact, the narrator does not even use her name; they refer to her only as “the wife of Uriah.” Even though Uriah is dead, and Bathsheba is now a widow. Even in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1, Bathsheba remains “the wife of Uriah.” Though David marries her after her period of mourning, the Bible makes no allowances for his sin. As king, his first obligation was to protect his subjects and dispense justice, especially for the poor and vulnerable. But in his affair with Bathsheba, David did the exact opposite. He used his power not to protect, but to abuse. He raped one

of his subjects and had her husband murdered. Bathsheba and Uriah, as well as the other people implicated in their exploitation, were helpless to resist a king.

Like Nathan, we as the body of Christ have a special prophetic responsibility to name injustice and speak truth to power – to hold that power to account, but also to amplify the voices of the people who are most vulnerable to the abuses of power. While Nathan does not directly comfort Bathsheba, there is comfort in knowing that he refuses to turn a blind eye to the terrible crime David has committed. He will stand up and tell his king just what God thinks about what David has done.

Nathan uses an effective preaching technique to confront David – he tells a story. This particular story is a “judicial parable.” It intentionally disguises a real-life situation to draw the guilty person into judging themselves. In David’s case it works perfectly. David is so caught up in the story, so angered by the injustice the rich man perpetrated, that he unconsciously condemns himself. At the climax of the story, when the rich man slaughters the lamb, David calls the fictional man “demonic” (v. 5 CEB). The Hebrew word here means “son of death.” Lacking compassion, the rich man sent the poor man’s lamb to the slaughter. Likewise, David had Uriah slaughtered. David wonders what kind of man would do such a thing...and this is when Nathan’s rhetorical trap snaps shut on David’s conscience. “You are that man!” he declares (v. 7).

The biblical law states that someone who has illegally taken another’s property must pay restitution (Ex 22:1). God declares that the restitution for Bathsheba’s rape and Uriah’s death will be paid through the violent fates of four of David’s children: The death of his infant son with Bathsheba; the incestuous rape of his daughter Tamar; the murder of his son Amnon; and the rebellion and eventual death of his son Absalom. For generations David’s descendants would be haunted by violence.

God had been exceedingly gracious toward David and, indeed, would have given him even more. But David rejected God’s graciousness by becoming a king who took from his people rather than giving to them. David’s actions were not just an offense against Bathsheba and Uriah and the man he sent to kill Uriah; they were an offense against God and God’s word. Now God would let the consequences of David’s sin take its course in the world.

God does not punish others for our sinful choices – that is a deeply problematic theology. But neither does God rescue us from the consequences of our choices. Real people are touched, sometimes in terrible and cruel ways, when we sin. We must counter our bent toward selfishness with a deep awareness of our interrelatedness. We must hold each other accountable for our actions.

Biblical scholar Bruce Birch writes that, “Powerful people in powerful positions often imagine that they can define reality in their own terms. David had succumbed to the illusion of royal reality as ultimate authority. Nathan has come to speak to him the truth of the matter, that there is a divine reality before which royal reality is judged.”<sup>2</sup>

The body of Christ is both a priest and a prophet in the world. Like a priest, we serve and bless creation. And like a prophet, we proclaim the divine reality of God’s kingdom vision to the economic, political, and religious powers of this world. We do this by speaking up for the powerless. Sometimes we will be called to speak truth to power and proclaim God’s judgment on the things that oppose His mercy and justice. Other times we will be required to make a witness of repentance by confessing our own sin and humbly receiving God’s judgment.

Scripture calls David a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22). He was this man not because he was perfect, but because he understood and embraced the transforming power of repentance. When David finally grasps the meaning of Nathan’s story and hears God’s judgment against him, he does not attempt to deny or justify his actions. Instead, he acknowledges his failure to act in accordance with God’s commandments and he throws himself upon God’s mercy. His confession is simple and direct: “I have sinned against the LORD” (v. 13).

In many medieval synagogue manuscripts, the scribe would leave a gap in the text following David’s confession. And in this gap the congregation would recite Psalm 51, the great penitential psalm that we read on Ash Wednesday. The psalm carries this superscription: “A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him just after he had been with Bathsheba.”

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce C. Birch, “1 & 2 Samuel” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. II (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 1294.

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me. (Ps 51:10-11 NRSV)*

The lectionary leaves out the last few verses of Nathan’s conversation with David, but I think they are critical to understanding how we are called to proclaim the word of God. Nathan has come to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. And in the end his comfort is not for Bathsheba alone; it is also for David – once comfortable in his power, now afflicted by the shame of his sin. Nathan assures David, “The LORD has removed your sin” (v. 13).

God’s forgiveness is as simple and direct as David’s confession. Forgiveness does not mean there will not be consequences; Nathan goes on to explain that David’s son by Bathsheba will die. But to repent means to turn and move in a new direction. And so, while David will pay a heavy price for his sin, his sin is not the end of his story. His story finds redemption in his son Solomon and ultimately in Jesus the Messiah, David’s greatest descendant. Repentance does not look back with regret. It looks forward in the hope that God can redeem anything. Repentance makes new life possible in the face of judgment and death.

We are called to proclaim the truth of God’s justice and God’s judgment. But we are also called to balance this proclamation with the good news of God’s mercy and forgiveness. We do this work of proclamation in more ways than just the sermon. Our entire act of worship is a form of proclamation. The words of Scripture are woven through our songs and our liturgy and our prayers. Every time we celebrate communion, we rehearse the grand salvation story found in our Bibles – from the garden to the cross to the grave to the sky. We remember that story and remind ourselves where we fit and the part we have been given to play. Because the story of God does not end with the last page in our Bibles. The story of God is ongoing and each one of us has been written into the plot. Our proclamation of the Word is not just for this hour of worship. As God’s reconciled and redeemed children, we are walking, talking proclamations of the kingdom of God. Our behavior beyond the walls of this church out in the world has the power to either point people to Jesus or turn people away.

Do our words and actions comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable? That is the true weight of the Word – not just the weight of our own repentance, but the weight of the mission that God has given us. Proclaiming the Gospel is a joyful responsibility, but a responsibility, nonetheless. The proclamation I make to you in my sermon every week impacts a concentrated group of people at one moment in time. But stop and think about how many different people you interact with in any given week, and you will begin to grasp the power that God has entrusted you with. Jesus was the words of God made incarnate – given flesh. And we continue that incarnational mission as the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

Thanks be to God for the holy weight of His Word and this sacred mission.

Amen.

## **Blessing of the Bibles**

The Bible is a symbol of the proclamation of God’s enduring Word in our midst. And so, we are going to do a blessing of the Bibles. We have our pulpit Bible, pew Bibles (on the book cart), Bibles in the library, and Bibles scattered all throughout this building. If you brought a special Bible from home, you can lay your hands upon it now.

But first a quick word about all these Bibles: We believe the Bible is a sacred text. We believe it is a living document imbued with the power of the Holy Spirit. We encounter God through its stories and wisdom and teachings. We are encouraged, challenged, edified, and instructed by the Bible. I preach from it every Sunday.

But the Bible is not God. After the liturgist reads the Scripture lesson, we recite this response: “The words of God for the people of God.” “Words” is plural, and its also lowercase. This is intentional. The words of God are found in Scripture. But the Word of God, with a capital “W,” is Jesus.

“The Word became flesh  
and made his home among us.  
We have seen his glory,  
glory like that of a father’s only son,  
full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

We worship Jesus; we do not worship the Bible.

Let us pray.

*God of justice and God of mercy, in these sacred pages we find your words, enfolded in the words and deeds and body of your Son, Jesus Christ. These words form the foundation of our Christian proclamation, the Gospel, the Good News. This Good News has the power to transform us and give us new life – if we let it. We open ourselves anew to your Word, Lord. Fill us with a hunger to study the Scripture and understand it. Cement these words in our hearts and minds. Deepen our knowledge of you through these words. And empower us to live out these words with the witness of our lives. For these are your words given for your people. Glory to God! Amen.*