

SERMON

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2 Samuel 11:26–12:13a, Ephesians 4:1–16

Scripture is full of our human desire for a sense of home, belonging, security. This scriptural longing for home, or family or safety — it can be seen in a mother lovingly placing a basket in the reeds in hopes of protecting her infant son. Or a faith community's very long journey through wilderness in the eventual hope of a promised homeland. It is having a place to lay your baby's head when there's no room at the inn. It could even be a borrowed tomb for the body of your beloved teacher when he's crucified. God's people desire freedom from isolation, poverty, oppression — to have instead a sense of home, belonging, safety.

In this story today from Samuel, there's a calling out of the sin of taking someone else's home, family or security. The prophet Nathan tells King David a story: how cruel it is for a rich and powerful person to carelessly take the one thing that provides a sense of home for another. This goes against cultural rules of that time, so King David judges this selfish behavior with condemnation. The irony of course is that this precious lamb in Nathan's story represents the home that Uriah and Bathsheba had before their family was unraveled by King David taking Bathsheba for himself. Their loss is a result of a king's unthinking acceptance of the power afforded a king, his unchecked privilege of the way things are. He's only shocked and personally grieved after Nathan spells it out: "Uh, my story was about you!" King David did not have an intuitive "aha!" moment, possibly because the air he breathed/the water he swam in tells kings that kings can take what they want. Nathan reminds him: not those who are serving in God's kin-dom. Those who have positions of privilege in God's community are to still care for the vulnerable and provide security for all.

From the hiding of baby Moses to the suffering of Uriah and Bathsheba, from Jesus' faithful disciples at his death to a fractured early Christian community in Ephesus, God's people have had either physical or spiritual displacement from home — time and time again. And it isn't just individuals who get harmed or even only individuals who are perpetrators. This isn't just a single example of an accidental unfairness from one wealthy king. It resonates because it fits in a larger story of ongoing, structural injustice. King David did what he did because it was unsurprising in a world and culture that created

an upward spiral for the special few and a downward spiral for many others. If the people of God are not careful, they may get caught in a complex system that encourages everyone to just accept "the way things are." They may forget to listen for the way God desires things to be.

God had discouraged the people from having a king in the first place, but they wanted a king like other nations. And so, they have one — but Israel's king is still to be checked by the community and by the Scriptures. It should not be "anything goes." Ephesians echoes this also, many, many generations later, as it instructs the people: Speak the truth in love, build up the entire community, make sure all can live whole lives and be appreciated for their gifts. God intends something more in God's kin-dom.

And yet, we are here in 2022 and still things aren't right. We, like King David, may accept — or at least resign ourselves to — the reality that some of us might have more privilege and wealth while others have very little. Without much thought, we may find ourselves playing out our assigned roles and reaping the benefits (or penalties) of wherever life has placed us along the economic-social stratum.

We sort of get used to hearing about billionaires and the multiple huge homes they amass. We get used to looking the other way as police move homeless encampments from visible roadways and underpasses to places we are less likely to witness how many people in our own community have no home.

We know we have a problem, just as our ancestors of faith did. We grieve that in the United States, 1 in 5 children live in poverty. We lament that nearly half a million Americans do not have a safe home and more than 65 million people worldwide have become refugees, displaced from their homes. Life is unraveling for so many.

Even harder, let's take an uncomfortable minute to recognize that here in Louisville, the land we call home had been traditional homeland for the Adena, Hopewell, Shawnee, Osage and Shawandasse peoples. Homelands were taken; treaties were broken.

Also here in Louisville, racial injustice is clear and ongoing in particular ways for African American siblings — as we witnessed the lack of justice for Breonna Taylor and so many others. Across our country, people of African descent who were enslaved have had generations of broken promises reinforced by

systemic discrimination. That discrimination has just become “the way things are” to such an extent that now the thought of reparations seems radical rather than simply being the economic recovery promised at the end of slavery and denied for hundreds of years since.

These realities are hard to hear. Probably as hard for us to hear as for King David to hear Nathan’s parable. And these harsh realities are not going to be a quick or easy fix. Yet God calls us to know what’s going on around us, to sit in the discomfort, to evaluate how we might benefit or participate, to repent and then to be transformed so that we can get on doing God’s work.

With God’s help, we can examine these hard realities, and rather than being paralyzed with guilt or reacting with defensiveness, we can follow the encouragement of the Ephesians text. In humility, we name the truth in love and then we use the many and diverse gifts with which God has equipped us. Together, we can promote the rebuilding of our community and world as one body, all parts flourishing, each one safe, each one home. The Rev. Dr. Jean Kim, a tireless advocate for the unhoused, died last summer at age 86. I was one of many people blessed by crossing paths with her when I was in college. She always wore this great purple shirt that said, “end homelessness.” She was born in North Korea in 1935, had to flee to South Korea a decade later, and then came to the U.S. in 1970. In her early childhood, she was forced to learn Japanese, and many Korean rights got lost. But even once Korea got independence from Japan, around when Jean was 10, the communist regime settled in. A new level of displacement became real. Her own family’s home and lands were seized, and eventually her family had to flee south to survive. They each got to take one backpack. In South Korea, they became refugees and were homeless. From a horrible fire that covered the whole area of Seoul where she was, all her remaining family photos and possessions were reduced to ashes. Somehow, from these ashes, her ministry to the vulnerable arose. She became a presbyterian minister when she moved to the U.S. and she founded the Church of Mary Magdalene in Washington state, a nondenominational church for women experiencing homelessness. It continues today as Mary’s Place, which last year provided more than 141,000 overnight stays and more than 424,000 meals. She created a women’s choir, gave women clean clothes, and otherwise provided connection, belonging, dignity, home. She worked on root causes doing public policy advocacy and pursuing racial justice. I give thanks to God for Jean and for others we’re blessed to know who show us how to face harsh realities of poverty, hunger, homelessness, injustice — and still to live lives worthy of the calling to which we are called.

And I’m also thankful that we have a variety of “Nathans” around us — people and organizations and communities willing to call us to account. In Louisville, CLOUT is an

organization that continually advocates and works alongside metro government to fund an Affordable Housing Trust Fund — and calls to account as needed when budget commitments get shaky. In D.C., Washington Interfaith Network is one of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s CBCOs — Congregation-Based Community Organizations. They have rehabbed and protected over 500 affordable apartments from being torn down or converted to condos and have worked for the construction of over 2,000 other affordable rentals while also getting funding committed for their affordable housing trust fund.

Community organizing and advocacy efforts are the “Nathans” of our time and help us both to hear the message of what’s wrong and give us some ideas of how to make amends.

So, where do we find ourselves in these biblical stories — and how does that help us find how to live out our own story? In what parts of our lives do we feel displaced from home, unraveled, or mistreated like Uriah or Bathsheba? God hears us as we grieve our losses and as we then feel our way back toward community and home.

In other parts of our lives, we may be trying to do some truth-telling like Nathan. It takes practice, might be messy and uncomfortable, and sometimes we might not do it well. But we are lifelong learners and can seek ways to do this kind of humble truth-sharing that Ephesians names, promoting a unified community where all are valued.

In still other parts of our lives, we may be King David — easy to see privilege, greed, misdeeds when someone else is the focus, but harder to see when we ourselves might be hoarding or consuming an unfair share. We still can use our gifts and skill, our creativity and humility to help deconstruct the unjust systems that keep people poor, unhoused and hungry.

Wherever we might see ourselves in the biblical stories, God does have a call on our story right here, right now. This call from Ephesians is to live lives worthy of the calling to which we are called. Part of that calling is to restore a common home, God’s people empowered and all sharing, all thriving.

So, what is your unique gift? What could your commitment be? What might we do together so that all people can feel at home, to feel connected and a sense of belonging, to feel safe in our city, our country, this world? May God continue to call and guide us and may we indeed pursue lives worthy of that call.

