

Mind the Gap

At the close of last week's text, Joshua calls the people of Israel to remember who they are by faithfully worshipping the God who acts again and again to redeem them. Joshua challenges the people's claim that they will follow God. They insist that they can and will...but they don't, not consistently it seems. Following Joshua's death, Israel cries out for a new leader, so God raises up judges to lead them and protect them. God takes pity on them as they face persecution and oppression:

But whenever the judge die[s], they...relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods...They [do] not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.¹

The book of Judges tells stories of some of our favorite biblical superheroes, like Deborah and Samson, but the book is more than its stories. The narrative recounts a dark and chaotic time when the descendants of Jacob's sons fight one another as well as other nations. The book of Judges ends on a somber note: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."² Hope comes when Hannah's child Samuel is called to serve God and the people, but when an aging Samuel appoints his own corrupt sons as judges, the people have had enough. They come to Samuel and ask for "a king...like other nations."³ God tells Samuel to listen to their voice, while warning them about what life with a king looks like. Speaking God's words, Samuel emphasizes to Israel that life with a king will be filled with give and take: the people will be expected to give, and the king will take anything and everything that he wants. In his description of a king, Samuel uses the word *take* 6 times in 8 verses.⁴ The people are not dissuaded; they still want a king. So a king is what they get. Saul is the first king; David is the second.

More is written about David than any other person in the Hebrew Scriptures. He is the handsome shepherd boy who has a special grasp on God's heart. He is the greatest king Israel has ever known. He is a fierce warrior and a passionate leader. He unites the people and brings the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. God makes a covenant with David and promises to build a dynasty through him. The first time the prophet Nathan is sent to David, he comes to announce that dynasty. Nathan now arrives with a promise of a different kind. David has maneuvered to

¹ Judges 2: 19, New Revised Standard Version

² Judges 21: 25, NRSV

³ 1 Samuel 8: 5, NRSV

⁴ See 1 Samuel 8: 11-19, NRSV

cover his tracks following his affair with Bathsheba. He has schemed to have her husband Uriah killed in battle, a battle that David has opted to sit out. God is not happy. Nathan is not showing up with great, good news this time. Nathan is charged with breaking this news to David. He has not come to tell David he has won the Powerball lottery. No, Nathan must tell David the hard truth.

David's sordid tale is compelling in a way, but such sordid tales have all but lost their shock value these days. Sadly we're no longer surprised when we hear stories of people in power behaving badly. So David's taking Bathsheba and his taking Uriah's life is not terribly surprising in 2018. We shake our heads, but we have almost come to expect powerful people to do such things. God has warned us after all. Kings take. It is what they do. The bar is not set all that high. Perhaps the most shocking piece of the story is what David does next. He repents.

In bible study on Wednesday, we tried to come up with a prominent person who had fallen from grace and then repented, genuinely repented. We could not come up with one. We also wondered how we as a society might respond if it actually happened. It is so rare, I'm not sure we would know what to do. We have grown so accustomed to public figures' fessing up only when they get caught, then covering their tracks, and spinning their words. How would we respond to a genuine confession? Would we be impressed? Would we see it as a sign of weakness? Would we even be able to trust that it was true?

Repentance is not a word we use very often, especially in the larger world. True confessions are associated with the latest celebrity scandal or the dark carved wood doors of confessional booths in the Roman Catholic churches we see in the movies, or for some of us in our memories. A few years ago, Pope Francis broke with protocol in the midst of a worship service. It was during Lent, and he was supposed to finish his sermon and head straight to an empty confessional booth to hear confession from "the ordinary faithful," as one account read. Instead, he headed directly to an already occupied booth and knelt in full view of everyone, confessing his own sins first. In watching one video of the moment, you can hear the whispers of those immediately around him.⁵ It's disruptive and humbling and refreshing and rare. With the scandals currently gripping the church, one wonders if we'll see a sight like that again any time soon. Because not only is such a move rare, it is also disruptive. It is not what we do. The Catholic Church's troubles are high profile, but they are not unique. Churches across the spectrum have fallen short repeatedly in how we have treated children, women, immigrants, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and people

⁵ <https://youtu.be/BKHKmEtpWao>

of color. There is much to confess. And yet we dodge, we get defensive, we make excuses, or we just ignore it and hope it will go away.

So what David does here is almost foreign; the words he offers in response to God's word spoken through Nathan is utterly unfamiliar...Except we do it every week. We gather in this place and confess our sin, the ways we have broken the covenant individually and as a community. It is an odd but holy practice, not one that we learn anywhere else. But then again, we are an odd and holy tribe. We do not play by the rules of the larger world—or at least we're not supposed to—and for all of his flaws, David does not either.

You may have been surprised to hear Andy's voice in the middle of the second lesson. If you followed along in the pew bible you may have noticed the header to Psalm 51 where it points to David's conversation with Nathan as the prompt for the writing of the psalm. One scholar observes that, "In many medieval manuscripts...a gap was left by copyists to allow for the reading of Psalm 51."⁶ It makes sense, doesn't it? If we read David's confession in 2 Samuel without that gap, without Psalm 51, the words ring dangerously hollow, the confession seems too easy, too pat, too much like the easy confessions we hear all too often, too much like the ones I for one am tempted to offer myself. Maybe I need that pause, that gap, too. Maybe we all do. Maybe that is one role this hour on Sunday morning can serve. Maybe this can be our gap, our pause when we encounter the word of God ourselves and recognize how needed our confession is.

Confession and repentance are not our default drive, after all. They have to be learned. And who is going to teach us? Through the ages, the gathered community has practiced confession and repentance, but I'm pretty sure practice has yet to make us perfect. I'm not sure perfection should even be our aim, but I do think we could be better, that I could do better. Confession is good for the soul, it is often said. And for individuals it is true, but could it be good for the collective soul as well? Could the church's teaching somehow begin to shape or re-shape the larger world? Maybe.

I am not suggesting that we move through the world apologetically. We are called to be bold in sharing the love of Christ, bold in working for justice, bold in making room for voices of those others would dismiss or overlook. But I wonder what it would look like for us to be bold in our willingness to admit when we have wronged God and one another, not only in here each week but in our daily comings and goings. Our tradition embraces David

⁶ Bruce Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. II, 1295.

as this great king, and we take solace in his being human like us, a man with feet of clay through whom God builds an earthly dynasty and brings us the greatest king of all in Jesus Christ. But what if we embraced David's boldness in confessing his sins, in his pleading with God to create in him a clean heart, to restore his spirit and make him whole? David, Israel's great and glorious king is a child of the covenant, as are we. We say it every week: we are a covenant people. We are bound to God and to one another through the work of our promise-making and promise-keeping God. This God makes a covenant with us and calls us to love God and neighbor. It is that simple and that hard. We are often tempted to speak of God's forgiveness and love in Jesus Christ, but we meet that love here, too. David is bold to repent because he knows the God of the universe to be a God of unfailing love. "Have mercy, O God, *according to your steadfast love,*" the psalm begins. In God we meet mercy grounded in steadfast love and forgiveness founded on faithfulness. God's faithfulness and mercy carve a gap of a different sort, a holy space for our confession to be heard. Without that gap, we might begin to believe that we do something to earn that mercy and forgiveness, that by speaking just the right words, we will get a hearing. But God is poised to hear us well before we speak. God's mercy is the starting point. God's love shapes a space for coming clean. For David and for us.

David's sin is horrendous. His arrogance is appalling. He is not what I would call a "model citizen." And yet, if we are to be true to our calling to share God's good news with the world in word and deed, David might just be a model we could follow. Not in his scheming and dodging. We're far too good at that as a society, already. What if we carried David's trust of God's unfailing love and his bold confessing with us out into God's world? Can you imagine a world where humility and confession were the norm? Where genuine repentance was routine? Me neither. But I would like to try.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.