

II SAMUEL 12:1-7

The thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and his children. It used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup and lie in his bosom and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him. So he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him."

Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die. He shall restore the lamb fourfold because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." Nathan said to David, "You are the man."

LUKE 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaerus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd could not

because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because Jesus was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said him, “Zacchaerus, hurry and come down for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” Zacchaerus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything I will pay back four times as much.” Then Jesus said him, “Today salvation has come to this house because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

ONE UPON A TIME

II SAMUEL 12:1-7
LUKE 19:1-10

Once upon a time, there was a king in Israel who was a renowned commander of his military and a seasoned politician who knew how to get

things done. He was beloved by his people and enjoyed a very high approval rating...as if it mattered...kings were not elected. There was a story circulating about him as a young lad who confronted a gigantic Philistine named Goliath who was as big as Shaquille O'Neal and wore armor and brandished a sword. With the fate of the Hebrew nation in peril in a high stakes battle with the invading Philistines, David, armed with only a sling shot, went out to face the heavily favored giant. He selected a round stone and loaded it on his sling shot and then fearlessly approached the enemy. And with one shot, he hit Goliath in the temple and dropped him in the dust. With that, he became a folk hero.

It should not be surprising, then, that his fame led him to believe he could do anything he wanted. And what he wanted was a beautiful young woman named Bathsheba whom he spied on an adjacent rooftop sunbathing au natural which was part of her purification ritual following her period. It so happened that her husband was one David's well reputed soldiers who was conveniently out on a mission. So he sent a servant to fetch her and bring her to his quarters. What was she, a mere maiden, to say to "No" such a powerful man who wanted only one thing? It was nonconsensual and resulted in a pregnancy.

So the powerful man now needed to protect his reputation and fix the

situation he created. It was a two-step process. First, arrange with his generals to put Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, into the front line of an impending battle, almost assuring that he would be a casualty. It worked. And with him now out of the way, he would marry Bathsheba to cover his tracks. Who would know? Well, God knew and sent his prophet, Nathan, to express his displeasure.

Once upon a time, a tax collector in Jericho whose parents named him, Zacchaerus, which might have meant "short-legged," rose in stature until he became the chief tax collector in the region. He developed a reputation for overvaluing property so that he could line his pockets with the excessive liabilities land owners would be obligated to pay. He skimmed off the top and became quite wealthy from his scheme. Everybody knew it, but anyone who could do anything about it was on his payroll. He was a first-class thug.

However, inside of every thug is a beating heart. And perhaps because Zacchaerus had likely been ridiculed as a child for his slight physical stature and maybe because nobody could accurately spell or pronounce his name, he had a pocket of repressed compassion in that heart for those who were bullied. So when he learned that Jesus, whom he had heard a great deal about, was approaching Jericho, he wanted to

see him for himself and who knows? —maybe even meet him. But how could he do this when the crowds lining the street Jesus was walking were blocking his view? He had not gotten to his position in life without being resourceful so he climbed a sycamore tree allowing him a clear sight line.

How strange life is at times. Jesus not only spotted him up there, but gently invited him to come down because he wanted to spend the night at his house. This displeased many in the crowd because they all knew Zacchaerus and wondered why in the world Jesus would select him as his host. But Jesus knew what none of them did—that this notorious tax collector did have a conscience and was ready to repent.

Stories are powerful because they give expression to truths about life and ourselves that go right to our guts. Like fairy tales, they are timeless and universal. Once upon a time, there was you and there was me. We were given names and social security numbers. And then we began to write. What is your story? What chapter are you on? Is the plot thickening? What still remains to be written?

And where is God in your story? The Biblical writers were great story tellers and used the medium to reveal truths about the role God plays in our lives. What we see in these two very short narratives as well as in the tale of the Prodigal is that God wants us to be whole and will use

creative approaches to get us to look into the mirror and see who we really are and what we need to do and where we need to go. With David, it was direct confrontation through his prophet, Nathan. With Zacchareus, it was with a surprise encounter which opened the windows and doors of his heart. With the Prodigal, it was with forgiveness and open, loving, arms to the future.

Make no mistake. God knows who you are and God knows what's in your heart. Keep your eyes open for you know not when God will desire an audience with you. Once upon a time...

Reverend Thomas Dunlap

August 6, 2023