

# **Righteous and Risky Rummaging Stages and Sequels**



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## 1 Chronicles 17: 1-15

There is a hero in this morning's story. Did you catch who it happened to be? It's Nathan, Nathan is the hero of this morning's story. My sermon is going to be a kind of case-study on Nathan because I think this figure has something to say to us today. There are many truth-tellers in the Bible, our beloved Jesus being sovereign of them all. But in terms of folks who were *not* God incarnate, Nathan takes the cake. He is, in my humble & professional opinion, the #1 truth teller in the Hebrew Scriptures. That is, Nathan knew how to speak truth, and not just any truth, but Nathan knew how to speak truth to power. Nathan was an insider. In fact, Nathan was King David's right hand man. He had David's ear like no one else in all the monarchy because Nathan was David's personal court prophet. Being a personal court prophet meant that Nathan constantly held three things in tension. Nathan had to serve God. Nathan had to serve the King. And Nathan had to remember that those two things *were not the same thing*.

Now there was no separation of church and state back then, but if you look at Nathan's legacy in the scriptures, he knew the danger of thinking what's willed on earth is automatically willed from on high. He knew that human beings have a way of creating God in their own image and doing things in God's name that have not a drop of holy in them whatsoever. Nathan was a smart cookie. But Nathan wasn't just smart, he was fiercely moral and courageous. He never let his relationship with King David, clearly a relationship built on respect, loyalty and love, he never let that relationship override his loyalty to God. Before being the King's go-to-guy, he was first and foremost YHWH's prophet. And that meant Nathan told the truth, no matter what.

Tom Ott and I picked this worship series on purpose. We

picked Phyllis Tickle's book about the historical and contemporary changes of Christianity on purpose. We picked these passages from Samuel and Chronicles, these passages about the movement from tribal configuration to monarchy on purpose. We picked these passages because these passages are about structural transition and we are a church in transition. Biblical stories lift up models of faithfulness and models of disaster, and sometimes those things co-exist in the same person (like Moses and Paul for example) and sometimes those things co-exist in the same church (like the Israelites in Canaan and the Church at Corinth for example). We know that as a church in transition, there's potential for faithfulness and disaster, in our leaders and in our church as a whole. We search these bible stories to be reminded of what faithfulness and what disaster look like, so that we can chose and live wisely. And today; the bible has something to say to us. Today the Bible is telling us how necessary it is—during times of change and transition—to have down-home, no holds-barred truth telling folks in our midst. Everybody and every church needs a Nathan or two. And we need some Nathans up in here.

Truth tellers are hard to come by. There's something hard about telling the truth, something costly, something threatening. And I think it has something to do with the nature of truth itself, truth being that not one of us has a monopoly on knowing the truth. Not one of us knows everything or everybody or every place or every point that God is trying to make. In fact, it seems like any clarity we DO get most often comes in the 20/20 utopia of hindsight.

Many of us want clarity before we speak up. We want to be sure that what we are saying is right. Problem is, we don't have 20/20 vision in the moment, because we are not God. There is no way to know exactly how our words will be perceived, how our words will motivate. There is always uncertainty and risk. And that's why truth-telling has everything to do with faith. Nathan's truth-telling is an

incredible act of faith, not just because of his proximity to the King, but also because of the *timing* of his delivery. Faithful truth telling is as much about timing as it is about anything else.

There are moments in life. Important moments. Moments when things hang in the balance. Moments in board meetings. Moments in your child's development. Moments in your marriage. A moment in the life of someone close to you, or perhaps a moment in your own life, a moment of unparalleled possibility that has the potential to make or break the future. A moment when silence is sheer evil, the wrong word a ticket to hell, and the right word, the difference between life and death. Nathan stepped up and delivered the truth in a time when anything but the truth would have been disastrous. David with good intentions wants to build YHWH a temple. Nathan with good intentions gives King David free license to do so: "Sure! Go ahead boss, I bet God would love a house." But later that night, YHWH visits Nathan and says "no." "No Nathan, David will not build the temple for me. In fact, I will build a house for him and all the ancestors of Israel. But not yet. David won't build the temple, his son Solomon will." Can you imagine that moment? Can you imagine having to give that morning's report to David? Can you imagine having to say to the most powerful man in the land: "No. Not you. You're not the one. It's not time yet." And can you imagine what it was like to be David, what it was like to have good intentions, to want to pour your life out in a construction project that would honor the maker of heaven and earth. Imagine what it's like to hear "no."

Now I imagine some of you in this room, like David, have seen your dreams disappear on you. Disappearing dreams, you know: that one thing you wanted to do, that thing you were so sure you were going to do, that thing you came so close to doing. Or perhaps you spent most of your energy and effort on this thing just to watch it slip away in the end. Disappearing dreams disturb us. A dream deferred—to

use Langston Hughes' famous phrase—can devastate us like nothing else. Disappearing dreams can create a hollow sorrow in us so deep that talk of God's goodness and God's will can strike us down right cruel. David's dream to build a temple did not come true in his lifetime. And when Nathan delivered the news, David could have taken the news with shock and dismay. He could have grown old and bitter, refusing to work hard anymore.

But instead, David hears the news and begins to praise God. How is that?

My guess is that David's reaction had a lot to do with Nathan's way of truth-telling. There is a reason Nathan knew how to deliver the truth with such precision. Nathan's truth-telling was a direct result of his ability to listen to and hear from God. ***His ability to speak came from his ability to hear.*** There's a direct correlation--but it's not a simple correlation. Nathan's timing and delivery gave David his ears to hear. We all need friends and colleagues who will tell us hard truth. But since we human beings are sensitive little creatures, we need people who can put the truth in a gentle package. We don't need to be blasted or to be torn down, particularly when it comes to our dreams or areas of struggle. But we do need faithful and loyal people in our space who will put God's "yes's and no's" into the big picture for us.

I have a couple of people in my life who play that role. I am no Kind David, but God *has* blessed me with several Nathans. I want to tell you about one in particular. Her name is Marjorie Denise Mathews. She is my pastor, my mentor in ministry and the mother of my soul. She has been my life line on more than one occasion. Marjorie grew up in Watts, Los Angeles. She descended from five generations of elementary school teachers. So naturally, Marjorie went into education after graduating from Princeton in 1984. She did consultation work with the NY city public school system, during which time she met a woman named Akiyu-

Hatano who would become her best friend, her sister and colleague. Marjorie and Akiyu bonded around their commitment to excellence in education for youth of African descent. Together, they started a charter school geared towards “leadership development, college preparation and African American history and culture”. Marjorie admits that school was her dream come true. Though Marjorie witnessed several break-throughs and educational miracles in the youth of West Oakland Community School, her heart was broken when the school had to close after 7 years of operation due to funding scarcity and burn-out. In the next five years, Marjorie’s marriage to the love of her life ended and Akiyu died suddenly and unexpectedly—in her early 40’s—in a medical accident that could have been avoided. Talk about a time of disappearing dreams.

When Marjorie talks about that five years, she never skips over the devastation, she never tries to gloss over the losses that almost did her in. But she also picked up the shards of broken dreams and moved closer to God. She wrote God letters asking why. She reached out in prayers full of tears. She read books about God’s role in suffering and books about how to faithfully move through grief. And she listened. Like Nathan, she listened. Most importantly, she listened.

As Marjorie moved deeper into God during her grief, moved deeper into God through her listening, she became clear that she was called to something greater than herself. She realized that all of her experience, love/loss and everything in between was paving the way, laying the groundwork for something pivotal. She is now a UCC pastor in Oakland, California. She is the most Godly pastor I have ever known. I was there on the day of her ordination and I have to tell you, I’ve never seen a church packed with people so full of love and loyalty. Apparently Marjorie is Nathan for lots of people.

Marjorie listens for God better than anyone I’ve ever met in

my life: her grief taught her how to do that. She listens for God better than anyone I've ever met, and I also think that's why Marjorie's word has more credibility with me than anyone else in my life. Marjorie's ability to speak truth comes from her ability to hear God. Direct correlation; not a simple correlation.

One thing Mama Marjorie always says to me when I am feeling lost and hopeless—which yes, I feel from time to time—is that God works in stages and sequels, that God has an incredible ecology, a super fine recycling system. Marjorie always says “God wastes nothing.” She reminds me that God does not cause suffering or the loss of dreams, but that God uses all of who we are and all of what we have in order to build the kingdom of God—even if that recycling happens after we've returned to dust and ashes.

I think Nathan said the same thing to David and that's why instead of sulking about not being the one to build the temple, David praises God. I think Nathan said to him: “David, God works in stages and sequels. You have laid the groundwork for what's coming. You have been faithful and courageous, and though you will not see it in your lifetime, you have made possible the miracle to come.”

Thank God for the Nathans of our world. Thank God for those who can hear God and as a result tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. And thank God for Kings with ears to hear. Thank God for this incredible ecology, this salvation that recycles and unfolds in stages and sequels. Thank God nothing is ever wasted and even when we hear God's “no,” there are dreams and miracles still to come.

Amen.

