

Ten years ago I was at a movie theater in Hollywood when I saw the film “The Dark Knight” for the first time. It was the day after it premiered in LA, and the audience was *packed* with people who had flocked to see Christian Bale and Heath Ledger duke it out as Batman and the Joker in the second of the Christopher Nolan Batman films. Now I know that not everybody here goes out of their way to watch superhero movies, but “The Dark Knight” was one of the first films in recent memory to show us just what kind of powerful storytelling a “superhero flick” could aspire to. It’s responsible in large part for the huge audience and success superhero movies have had over the last decade. And there’s one quote from “The Dark Knight” that has stuck with me ever since I first heard it. It’s full of poetry and impact, and it feels like it has to be true, even if you aren’t entirely sure what it means.

It’s first spoken by Harvey Dent... the white knight prosecuting attorney of Gotham City, a man whose morals and commitment are beyond reproach, and who has dedicated his career to cleaning *up* the crime-ridden city and shutting down the evil that’s been allowed to fester there. He’s sitting at dinner with some friends, discussing the future of Gotham and the questionable work the Batman is doing fighting crime. And he says the following line: “You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain.”

Now I don’t actually know how *inevitable* that saying is, but the words *themselves*, and the implications they represent, *definitely* carry a lot of weight.

It’s poetic, then, that by the end of the movie the heroic Harvey Dent is driven *mad* by the weight of the cruelty of the criminals in Gotham, leading him down a path of anger and

violence that turns him into a villain just as bad—if not worse—than the ones he was trying to stop.

There's another quote from history that relates to this one. They don't mean the *same* thing, precisely, but their meanings are connected. This quote was penned by John Dalberg-Acton in 1887, and even if you haven't seen a single superhero movie, there's a good chance you've heard it before. "Power tends to corrupt, and *absolute* power corrupts absolutely."

I bring up these two quotes because today we are talking about King David, a man who was intimately familiar with their meaning.

Some background so we're all on the same page about who it is we're talking about. David lived about a thousand years before Christ, which puts him a couple hundred years *after* Moses and Joshua, who led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land. Remember them from the last few weeks?

Since the death of Joshua, the Israelites had established a united kingdom under the rule of King Saul... and, well, as kingdoms tend to do they kept getting into wars. Enter David, a young shepherd boy who kills the Philistines' greatest warrior Goliath with nothing but a rock from a sling. Long story short, everybody loves David, the underdog hero of the Israelites. He and King Saul's son Jonathan became best friends, or maybe even lovers, depending on how you interpret the text, and David became a great commander over Saul's armies.

He was the hometown hero, the self-described poor nobody lifted to great heights by his deeds. Saul gave his own daughter to David in marriage, which put him a heartbeat away from

the crown... but secretly Saul wanted him dead, because he was afraid David was a threat to his power. But no matter what Saul threw at him, David always prevailed, racking up victory after victory for the Israelites, both with strength and with a charming sort of backwoods cleverness.

He was equal parts Luke Skywalker, Jack in the Beanstalk, and Robin Hood. Finally, his charm even wins over King *Saul*, and he is named Saul's successor, eventually becoming King himself. And where Robin Hood had his merry men, David had his "mighty men." One of those mighty men was named Uriah the Hittite... which brings us to today's Scripture from The Second Book of Samuel.

Who here loves a good soap opera? My mom and my grandmother were big fans of Guiding Light when it was on the air, and growing up there was always something like All my Children or One Life to Live on the TV when I visited my grandmother's house.

The verses that lead *into* what Warren read for us a few minutes ago feel like they're ripped from the script of a daytime soap. I *could* have asked him to read the whole *thing*... but I *mean* it when I say that *nobody* would feel comfortable reading *that* kind of story in front of a *church* full of people. But it's important to understand what *happened* to David after he became king, so I'm going to... paraphrase the Scripture for polite company.

Previously, on "All the Kings' Children..."

King David had sent all of his armies to go and fight the Ammonites without him, and while they were gone, he spotted Bathsheba bathing on the roof of her home. Bathsheba was the wife of one of David's mighty men, Uriah the Hittite, but that wasn't about to stop him.

Infatuated by the sight of the bathing beauty, he summoned her to his chambers and lay with her. I don't think I need to explain that particular euphemism. As a result, Bathsheba became pregnant. Now, David wanted to avoid a scandal, so he called Uriah and his men home from the front lines and encouraged Uriah to "spend some time" with his wife before the next battle.

He was *hoping* that this would make it look like it was *Uriah's* baby after all, and not David's, so that no one would realize what David had done.

But Uriah was a stand-up guy, and he wasn't going to break the army's rule about "fooling around" before battle. Your mind has to be *clear* to fight in the Israelite army, so you spend the nights before going to war in the barracks with your fellow soldiers, free of distraction.

Well, David's cover-up wasn't working, so he ordered the general of his armies to set Uriah up. In the thick of the fighting on the front lines, the other soldiers were to move *away* from Uriah and allow him to be killed. *That* worked.

After Bathsheba's mourning for her late husband was over (whatever that means), David took her as his wife, and she gave birth to his son: seemingly legitimate, if a little premature.

And he would have gotten away with it too, if it weren't those meddling prophets. God revealed to the prophet Nathan what King David had done, and Nathan went to the King and told him the story that we heard read today from Second Samuel.

A story about a rich man and a poor man. A rich man with many flocks and herds, and a poor man with only one lamb to his name. The poor man cared for that lamb as if she were his

own child. She ate from his table, played with his kids, and slept on the foot of his bed. Many of us here have had pets like that. Family. Beloved. Well the rich man had to prepare a feast, but instead of butchering one of the countless nameless sheep he owned, he took the poor man's beloved lamb away and cooked it for dinner. Just like the name of one of my favorite punk rock songs: "Robin Hood in Reverse"

Who's the villain in that story—the rich man or the poor man?

Do you feel *bad* for the poor man, who had the one lamb he had loved and cared for *so* much *stolen* and *butchered* for nothing but a quick meal?

David did. Just imagining that this story might be true was enough to fill David with righteous anger against the wealthy man who needlessly took something so precious from one that had so little. He wanted to see the rich man punished, and to see him make amends for his crime and his lack of sympathy for the poor man.

"But *you're* the *rich man!*" shouted Nathan. "It was you all along! God gave you *everything*. A *blessed* life. God gave you victory over Goliath—a fight you yourself said you couldn't have won without God handing it to you. You are beloved by all the people, you live a life of wealth and luxury and power, and you have *several* wives of your *own*. Yet Uriah, a loyal soldier with one wife he loves with all his heart... you use your power to seduce his wife, impregnate her, try to cover it up, then conspire to have Uriah killed... and then take Bathsheba for your own once he's out of the way. *You're* the monster here."

Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain.

David's failing shows that all of us, no matter how *lowly* our origins or how *good* and *moral* and *heroic* we are... we *can* all become the villains of our own story. We *all* have the capacity for sin, and we can all slide into it, sometimes without even realizing. Like Harvey Dent, even our best intentions *can* lead us down the road to darkness.

Now... those who make a habit of watching the national news... know that there are a lot of parallels in recent memory that one might *draw* from Nathan's *story* about the rich man taking the poor man's goats. And there are just as many parallels that one might draw from *David's* history of extramarital affairs, abuse of power, cover-up, conspiracy, scandal, and hypocrisy.

There are plenty of corporations out there abusing the system, plenty of CEOs getting wealthy beyond imagining by forcing their employees to live in poverty, plenty of tax-cuts for the rich while the cost of living for the working poor and the disenfranchised continues to climb... year after year... while the value assigned to their labor continues to fall. And there are countless politicians who benefit from the practice of "Robin Hood in reverse:" robbing from those that have little, for the good of those that have so much. Acton was right, power has a tendency to corrupt, and the greater the power, the greater the chance for—and depth of—that potential corruption.

I... *apologize* for straying into the line of "getting political" ...but I didn't write the story of David... it's my job to *engage* with it. And there *is* a nation-wide election coming up on Tuesday, November 6th ...one that—like so many before it—can have far reaching consequences on issues and human realities ripped from the very stories of the Bible we hold so dear. Issues *just* like the ones that have come up in Second Samuel today.

Now don't worry, I'm not going to try to tell you who to vote for. I'm still a relative newcomer to Maine, and *I* haven't yet *decided* on who *I'm* going to vote for for anything. And

I'm *not* going to do something as *irresponsible* as trying to say, "Oh, *this* party is the *rich* man in this story, and *this* party is the *poor* man."

In part because I think it's *unethical* for a pastor to endorse a political candidate *or* a political party, but also because *all* of the major parties in this country are *guilty* of the *same* kind of sins that God tears into King *David* for.

I said it before: we *all* have the capacity to become the villains.

What I *will* ask you to do is to seek out leaders who are upright, heroic, and ethical, and who seek to *serve* the *people* in the same ways that *Jesus* did. With compassion and grace. With love. Vote for *them*... and then hold them *accountable*. Be vigilant; don't let their power corrupt them. Don't let *them* become the *villains*. Through Nathan, God told us *exactly* where David went wrong. As individuals, we are called to do *better* than David... to not let the blessings we have been given and the human flaws we are stuck with turn us into a disappointment to God.

And as a *people*, blessed with free will, self-determination, and the right to self-governance, we are called to be like the prophet Nathan... and hold our leaders to task.

Because there's *actually* a happy *ending* to David's story!

I learned while I was training to become a pastor that no matter what dark places your sermon takes people to, you must always find your way back to *hope*. Always preach the Good News.

Nathan's words, and the story of the rich man and the poor man—they were a splash of cold water for David. A wake-up call and a look in the mirror under the sober light of day. When he realized what he had become, King David repented, which in Hebrew means to “feel sorrow and turn around,” and in Greek it means “a change of mind and conduct.”

David apologized to God and fought to change his ways for the rest of his life, to become not just the hero the people needed, but the hero the people deserved.

He faced consequences for his actions, to be sure. That first child he had with Bathsheba did not survive, and he faced his own justice, along with struggles and challenges and insurrections until the day he died... but he also found peace, joy, fulfillment, service, and a legacy. A positive legacy. In the poetic words of Second Samuel, “David rose from the ground, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes.”

Just as David shows us that we can all become villains, he also shows us that even at our *worst*... we have the strength within us to turn back to *good*.

So today, if you find you have lived long enough to become the villain of your own story, *you can repent*. Lay yourself bare before God and then get up, turn around, and change your ways. Become the hero you were always meant to be.

And if instead you're *Nathan* today... and you're one that can recognize the villains like David that are in power or are seeking more for their own benefit, then I charge you to be the prophet of the Lord that *you* were always meant to be. Hold our Davids accountable, for the good of our kingdom, *and* for the good of *all* the poor farmers with just one beloved lamb

sleeping on the foot of their bed. Be the hero Gotham deserves. The hero David should have been *all along*... and the hero we *all* have the capacity to be.

Following in the way of Jesus, may it be so. Amen.