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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Solidarity, not Judgement

2 Samuel 11:26-28,12:1-13

When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son.

But 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 very 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 with 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, but 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! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the Lord: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun." David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." Nathan said to David, "Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die."

Kate Bowler is living with stage IV, noncurative cancer. She's written and spoken about it extensively - a couple of viral articles in the *New York Times* including one called, "What to Say When You Meet the Angel of Death at a Party," a bestselling book and podcast that share the name *Everything Happens for a Reason (and other lies I've loved)*. She is also a professor of History of Christianity in North America at Duke Divinity School and studies

the movement known as the Prosperity Gospel, Christians who believe God rewards faithful and morality with riches, good health, and a lack of suffering and that the opposite - illness, poverty, hardship - are evidence of God's punishment. If you've ever heard Bowler speak, you'll know the irony of having noncurative cancer while studying people who think that's a punishment isn't lost on her. She is a walking question; namely, the question that asks, why do bad things happen to good people? For so long, we have answered that question by assuming every bad thing is a divine punishment, and, if not a punishment, at least a test. And, folks, it is time to put that assumption to bed. Let us, instead, pick up the mantle that suggests maybe even under all the divine judgement and punishment the Bible likes to record, maybe there is a different way God lives with us and with the world. Not judgement and punishment, but love, redemption, and solidarity.

As a recap, last week we witness David commit a number of horrifying crimes. Specifically, he raped a woman and had her husband murdered. Remember also, the story shows us the way two different people dealt with pain and trauma and red hot loneliness: David transmits his pain onto Bathsheba, her husband Uriah, and onto his children. Bathsheba turns her pain into resiliency and courage, raises the wisest king the world has ever known, and takes her place as Queen Mother and advisor to King Solomon.

In today's edition, the chickens come home to roost. Nathan, the prophet, comes to call and by the end of his visit, divine retribution has been doled out: trouble in David's own house, and, the lectionary cuts this off, the death of the child born to Bathsheba. Child loss is simply too common then - and now - for us to take this story lightly. In the ancient world and in the modern world, childbirth and young childhood is risky. Yet this is one of only two stories in the entire Bible that records the death of a child presumed to be an infant. Last week, many of you left worship and asked this one question: Why is this story even here? I mean, if you read between the lines of a conquering king who also has many wives—wives who are known by the names of the previous spouses— we probably don't need this story to know he is a jerk. And as this story goes on, and we are put face and face with the suffering that will be visited on the house of the man who is known for being "one after God's own heart," that question only deepens. Why is this story here? Is this just a story about how the mighty do, in fact, fall? And assumes collateral damage is simply an expectation of that fall?

And, let's be clear, because we are going to exit David's story in worship after this week, David *has* fallen. The trouble within his house will happen when David's son Absalom attempts to usurp power from David—to take it by hook or by crook, as the saying goes. Absalom will not succeed and will, himself, die in a horrifying accident. And David, himself, will die broken and confused. But after king that follows will be held to the standard of David.

Throughout the Bible, there is evidence that what has become for us Scripture—Word of God, Word of Life—is heavily edited. Editors clearly decided what stories are recorded,

but, more importantly, editors changed *how* they are told, an act which tells more about the worldview and context of the writers and editors than about God's self. Scripture loves to label the cause of hardship, suffering, and death as *divine punishment*. Because, really, if there can just be a menu assigning a cost to each sin, everything would just be easier. If there could be a formula adding our good deeds and subtracting our sins, well, we could know exactly where we stand. True, we could know where we stand, but where is God in such a system? Funny how often the punishment that fits the crime seems to fit our desires to a T, isn't? It is so much easier for there to be a *reason* for what has happen, rather than that it is simply a *tragedy*. So much easier to blame abortionists and gay people for hurricanes; to blame mothers for birth defects; and smokers for lung cancer than to admit that suffering happens in the world for no explainable reason.

I wonder if we so often determine the cause of death to be divine punishment because God is never far from those who suffer? Have we confused the issue? Oh, God is here, someone must have done something wrong! I think of Bartimaeus in John's gospel, the man born blind. When Jesus and his disciples happen upon Bartimaeus on a daily walk, the disciples try to turn him into an object lesson, "Who sinned," they ask Jesus, "this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" And Jesus's unforgettable answer is, "Neither. He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Perhaps God is found near to those who suffer, not because God is doling out punishment, but because God is *always near to those who suffer*. Where we have looked for, and, therefore, found divine judgment and punishment, if we had laid aside our own self-righteousness for just one second more, perhaps what we would have found instead is that God's love is expressed in solidarity for our lowness and not in reward how far we can rise.

After all, this story about David is the story of a father who made a terrible mistake, a terrible mistake and it cost him the lives of at least two beloved children. In this story, we may be reminded of the story of a Father whose son dies on a cross with the weight of the world on his shoulders. God doesn't merely see the pain of this world, God is in it - deep in it. God stands with the brokenhearted, the poor, the disenfranchised. And whatever redemption is in the world, whatever resurrection, wherever we rise, God is the author of it.

This, Beloved, is gospel, it is the Good News that we try to discern in all things. And yet, for those of us who are comfortable, hardworking, and healthy, it may not feel like freedom. Darn it, I'm a good person. I want that recognized by God. I want to hear, "well done, good and faithful servant." But, no, the good news that I often receive is this: it will be in solidarity with lowness that I will be granted a breathtaking experience of God. Unfortunately for me, and maybe for you, I may have to give up a lot to be granted that view. I may have to admit that, like David, I am the one. I am the sinner. I am at fault. I am complicit.

Beloved, the truth is, we will be called from this place to tear apart the rituals that name as punishment that which is purely tragic. We will have to tear apart the lies that assign

blame: that blame poor people for their poverty; immigrants for their need to seek refuge away from their homes; marginalized people for their loneliness and excommunication from society. We will have to tear apart the lies that we have bought into; to give up our power and privilege and to take our place among those the world numbers as the least and those God names Beloved, people after God's own heart.

Amen.