

## **Developing A Prophetic Imagination**

A Sermon by James R. Newby

Text: II Samuel 11:26-12:13

Most of us have heard the story, The Emperor's New Clothes. Here is a brief synopsis...One day, the emperor is approached by smooth-talking out-of-towners who want to make for him a new set of clothes, made from the very finest materials the world has ever seen. They are so fine, in fact, that they are invisible to those who were unfit for their position or, as the story goes, unusually stupid. Day and night the conniving weavers worked hard on an empty loom, but the emperor said nothing for fear that he would be discovered unfit for his position. When the weavers announced their work done, they pretended to put them on the emperor. All who were present told him how wonderful they looked, because they too feared being found lacking if they claimed to see nothing but a naked emperor before them. As the emperor pro-cessed through the town, listening to the *oohs* and *ahhs* of the crowd, a little boy finally cried out, "But he hasn't anything on!" The crowd then burst into laughter, finally admitting that they too saw nothing on the emperor, and the king, now embarrassed, recognized the trick, but continued in naked defiance through the streets of the town.

**The Emperor's New Clothes can be a very funny story. It is one that leaves you hoping that you would never stand by and let such a thing happen to someone else, let alone happen to you. It would be even more laughable were it not all too often true. It is a difficult thing to tell someone the truth. Isn't it best just to live and let live? Isn't it best to just let others go about their business, even if it leads to their demise, and to ask that others just simply stay out of your business as well?**

**In the passage from Hebrew scripture which I just shared, we read about another king who ended up benefitting from having someone in his business. You may be familiar with the events that lead up to the exchange between Nathan and David. One day, when he should have been off to war, David was home and saw a beautiful woman bathing on her roof. It was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of David's generals. David asked that she be brought to his palace. They had an affair, and soon David found out that Bathsheba was pregnant. David then began to spin a terrible web of deceit, eventually sending Uriah to the battle front where he would be killed. Bathsheba then became David's wife, and all was well...But not really!**

**If you are a King, it is easy to assume that you are on the right track and that you are doing just fine. It is easy to believe that you have handled your business appropriately. After all, people would tell you if it were not,**

wouldn't they? They would never let you, for example, parade down the streets with no clothes on, or get away with shooting someone on 5<sup>th</sup> avenue in New York City. At some point, someone would intervene...Right?

As Christians, and certainly as Quakers, a part of our roll in this world is a prophetic one. Being a prophet means that we are on call to speak of God's truth, beauty, justice and love right in the middle of other people's business. Just read about some of the ways Quakers have, for 350 years, spoken the truth with love, right in the middle of other people's business! We may shy away from claiming a prophetic voice for fear that we will end up "meddling." But *what if* the prophetic voice, and our role as prophets in this world has less to do with making sure people hear about their wrong choices, and more to do with helping people see the possibilities that exist when different choices are made? If there is anything that we can learn from Nathan's confrontation with David, it is that being a prophet has less to do with triggering someone's guilty conscience and more to do with triggering their imagination.

Walter Brueggeman, a Hebrew Scripture scholar, has talked about "The Prophetic Imagination." Walter lives here in Cincinnati, and is a very active participant in Amos, which this Meeting supports. Whenever I attend the Amos meetings, I always try to sit next to Walter so that I can talk with him about the Bible. The *Prophetic Imagination* that Walter writes about includes,

by necessity, the confrontation of wrongdoing, or, in the language that Quakers understand, the intentional act of bringing the darkness into the light. At times our prophetic role is simply to call attention to the evil in our world, to notice it and point it out, and to make sure that it is seen in the light of day. But the *Prophetic Imagination* sends us *further* on that task, asking us to not just point out the wrongdoing, but to then speak truthfully about the world as God would have it, free from evil and filled with truth, beauty, justice and love. The hope is not just that evil would be exposed in our world and in our lives, but that the goodness of a life lived in line with God would be seen and would inspire us to get in line with that vision.

A good example of *Prophetic Imagination* would be the 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. What if he had stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and simply listed the many ways that racial injustice and inequality existed in the United States? I am sure that many gathered that day would have agreed with Dr. King, but would they have been equipped to envision a new reality? Would they have been inspired to work for change and justice? Instead, Dr. King proclaimed that he had a dream, and from that time on a *new* possibility of what freedom and equality meant became real and worth pursuing.

**What are the stories that have ignited your imagination and that have witnessed to a different way of living in this world? Where are the places, or the people, that need some *Prophetic Imagination*? And what may be a bit more difficult question, where might God be using some *Prophetic Imagination* within you?**