

December 24, Advent 4B (2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38)

I imagine Nathan waking to the word of the Lord with his heart pounding.

by [Martha Spong](#) in the [November 22, 2017](#) issue

I've always liked knowing what is expected of me. Being well informed reduces the chance of getting things wrong or upsetting other people. Many times I have prayed to know exactly what God wants me to do, but those instructions are usually less explicit. I might have a dream that seems to point in a particular direction, or an encounter or conversation that raises a possibility, but depending on the lens used to interpret the words or the images, more than one conclusion might be drawn.

I want to think it would be reassuring to have more clarity. Yet in the Bible, the people who receive that kind of specific instruction usually find their safety and security threatened or their position and place disarranged.

The prophet Nathan, new counselor to King David, goes along with his monarch's decision to build a temple for the ark of the covenant. If the king can live in a palace of cedar, surely it must be right to provide a resting place, an honored location, for the holiest treasure of God's people. Before even a night can pass, however, the word of the Lord comes to Nathan. How? A dream? An angel? A voice in the darkness? All these possibilities sound unsettling.

Once, in the days when I was discerning what might come next in my ministry, I dreamed I stood in an enormous, traditional church. Near a high altar, a group of tall men prepared to preside over a traditional Eucharist laid on a white linen cloth. Meanwhile, on the floor of the sanctuary, a friend and I spread colorful cloths onto round tables where people would gather to serve each other the bread and the cup. The word of the Lord? Holy, holy, holy! I thought I heard a drum, as my heart beat so hard it woke me.

I imagine Nathan waking to the word of the Lord this way, heart pounding as he realizes the word of the Lord is not in agreement with the king.

“Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in?” Nathan needs to ask David, “What right have you to think you would be the one?” This must make him pause for a moment, wondering how the actual conversation will unfold, and whether he will still have a job at the end of the next day. David could easily come back at Nathan. *I am a hero, and I am a general, and I am the victor, and I am the king. Who else would be more qualified?*

I find it fascinating that God puts both Nathan and David in this position from the beginning of their relationship. David receives deeply humbling news. Not only does God not want him to build a temple, not only does God revel in the freedom of living in a tent, not only does God make it clear that God is the one in charge of establishing David’s house, but someday, there will be a temple, and David will not be the one to build it.

There is work to be done, David, but it is not yours to do.

In my dream, it seemed like there was work that was mine to do, but the symbolism was pretty broad. I am glad I dreamed it, even if I could not translate it into some specific action; at the very least, God took an interest in me.

God’s interest in Mary merits the dispatch of an angel. Not only does the angel favor a future that will risk her reputation, but Gabriel proposes a situation she cannot imagine as possible. How can it be possible for her to become a mother when she is still a virgin?

She wonders aloud, “How is it possible this is mine to do?”

In her early twenties, Jennifer Knapp was a contemporary Christian music star. When she dropped off the map of the music world in 2002, people wondered why. There was talk of burnout. There was also talk—gossip—about her sexual orientation. The CCM scene is conservative, and the fans look to the musicians as role models. Artists’ personal lives affect their bottom line, and fans expect that Christian musicians will be only and always heterosexual.

Knapp’s guitars sat idle for a long time, but music and God would not let her go. After a sojourn in Australia, she returned to the United States in 2009 to perform again. She also came out as a lesbian. Her life became a testimony that what had seemed impossible—to be both gay and Christian—was not.

David and Nathan's conversation is not depicted, just briefly narrated. Nathan speaks to David as instructed, reversing his support of the day before: David is not to build a house for the ark; rather God will build David's house, a dynasty. David receives this humbling news and goes to sit in the presence of the Lord. Nathan remains as his adviser. They will have other difficult conversations together, perhaps made possible by this vulnerable moment.

Mary asks her question aloud, and the angel reassures her. Even when the things God calls us to do seem unlikely, we can trust that they are not impossible. Jennifer Knapp is pursuing a masters in theology at Vanderbilt Divinity School; in September she spoke at Unauthorized: Nevertheless She Preached, a preaching festival put on by clergywomen in Waco, Texas.

God has work for all of us, particular to each of us. The news comes by angels, by dreams, by signs read or heard in ordinary moments. As our hearts pound hard, we hear the word of the Lord telling us what is ours to do. We may feel a hand moving to keep our hearts in our chests as we respond, "Let it be with me according to your word."