As children, we are often told a tale of how difficult it may be for us to tell the truth to others, especially when it is a hard truth to hear. We may all, at one time, have heard the story of The Emperor’s New Clothes. 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, and 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 processed through the town, to the feigned “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 on in naked defiance through the streets of town.

The Emperor’s New Clothes can be a very funny story, 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 difficult to tell someone the truth, especially when it either puts us in a tough position or puts others in a place of discomfort. Isn’t it best sometimes to just live and let live? To just let others go about their business, even if it is leading to their demise, and to ask that others just simply stay out of our business as well?

We read in Second Samuel another story about a king who ended up benefitting from having someone in his business. Our Scripture today picks up on a particularly climactic scene in the life and history of King David. Many of you may be familiar with the events that precipitated this exchange between Nathan and David. David, who most children know as the little shepherd boy with the sling and the stone, who defeated Goliath, was now the king, charged with the task of keeping the heart of Israel listening to the heart of God, and he had all he could ever want at his fingertips. 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 in an attempt to cover over this mistake. He asked that Uriah be brought back from the war to spend time with his wife, but since Uriah was so devoted to his duty, he slept outdoors on the ground instead. This left David in a bit of a bind, and so his remedy was to send Uriah off to fight at the very front of the battle, ensuring that he would not return home alive. Bathsheba then became David’s wife and from the outside looking in, all was well.

But all was not well. 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’ve handled your business appropriately and you’ve made the best decision given the circumstances. After all, people would tell you if it were not, wouldn’t they? They’d never let you, for example, parade down the streets with no clothes on or, I don’t know, get away with murder. At some point, someone would intervene, right?

As a society, and certainly in the South, we’re not too keen on getting overly involved in other people’s lives—not directly anyway. We do enjoy from time to time discussing what is going on in someone else’s life when they’re not around, but once they walk into the room, things tend to get a bit quieter. After all, we probably shouldn’t worry too much about other people’s business. As Christians, though, part of the life we are baptized into is a prophetic one. Being a prophet means being always on call to speak into the world the
presence and power of God, and it is a role that much of the time, requires us to stand on behalf of God right square in the middle of other people’s business.

We often may shy away from claiming a prophetic voice for fear that we’ll end up meddling. Are you familiar with that term—meddling? Getting into people’s business. Telling others what they should and should not be doing. Ordering their house when we should instead be focusing on our own affairs. It is a fear ingrained into our culture. What others do is their business, and if they want to make the wrong choices, then who am I to tell them otherwise?

But what if the prophetic voice, what if our role as a prophet 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 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.

After all, anyone with a rulebook can point out faults in others. Anyone with a whistle can be a referee. But to be a prophet, to be someone who leads others to see the future God has for them, to speak God’s word into the lives of others…that takes a bit more. For our Scriptures are not a book of rules so much as a story of a whole other way of living, a completely different way of seeing the world. We long to see the world as God sees it, as a place that in its brokenness is still worth redeeming, still a place of redemption and hope. To be a prophet is to learn to see others in that way, as people who in their brokenness are still capable of redemption, who in their despair are still within the grasp of hope and grace. To speak prophetically is to enter into that brokenness and darkness and flip the switch on their imagination so that they too can see that the future God has in store for them is a reality within their grasp.

Walter Brueggemann has termed this the “prophetic imagination.” It does include, by necessity, the confrontation of wrongdoing, the intentional act of bringing the darkness into the light. At times, our prophetic role is simply to call attention to the sin in our world, to notice it, to 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 wrongdoing but to then speak truthfully about the world as God would have it, free from evil, and filled with beauty, compassion, and grace. The hope is not just that evil would be exposed in our world and in our life, 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.

How different would our world be, for example, if Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 and simply listed the many ways that racial injustice and inequality existed in the United States? I am sure many gathered that day would have agreed with Dr. King, but would they have been equipped to envision a new reality, inspired to work for change and justice? Instead, Dr. King loudly 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?

In October of 2006 a man walked into an Amish schoolroom in Pennsylvania, shooting and killing five young girls and himself. Within hours, the Amish community victimized by this horrible crime responded with words and acts of forgiveness. They cared for the gunman’s widow. Many attended the gunman’s funeral. They did not forget what had been done, and did not find the grief to be any less over the great tragedy that occurred in their community, but they did take quite seriously the words they often prayed to “forgive those who trespassed against them”. No one said it was easy, but they knew it was right. As a Christian, hearing stories like this remind us of how we just might possibly live up to the words we pray and the words Jesus has spoken to us. Not just as guidelines or nice gestures, but as real, often difficult, but certainly possible alternatives to the ways of the wider culture.
Where are the stories in your own life that have awakened you to the possibility of a different way of living? Where have you seen God’s transforming love at work in the world?

I spoke to a young man once who was answering a call to go into ordained ministry and so was visiting the divinity school to learn more about it. It turns out we had a mutual friend, and when I spoke to our friend later about meeting this young man, the friend’s first response was “Him!? He’s going into ministry?” It turns out the middle-school aged child he remembered was quite different from the college graduate I had met. People change. Lives can be transformed. At some point in that man’s life, someone, some church, some friend along the way started meddling in his life, and helped him think differently about the life he was leading, and the places he could go.

As a prophet, Nathan was called by God to go and meddle in David’s life. But he approached David not with direct confrontation and a detailed list of David’s wrongs, but with a story. It was a strategy borne not out of fear but out of genuine concern and love both for David and for God. What he wanted was not to trick David into pronouncing his own judgment, but to make certain that what David heard in the parable translated into what David felt about his actions. Nathan told David of a poor man who had a pet lamb. That man loved that lamb like a daughter. But one day, a rich man came and took that beloved lamb away from the poor man to slaughter it and feed it to his guests. David could see that little lamb and he could feel the pain of the poor man. David became angry at the evil the rich man had done and declared that he should be put to death for doing such a terrible thing. “But David,” Nathan said to him, “you are that man.” Nathan’s parable caused David to wake up from his calloused self-righteousness and insulated conscience. David was acting like the emperor in his new clothes, parading around in his sin with no one willing to or able to hold up a mirror and show him that the royal immunity to which he felt entitled was an invisible thread. He was the one God anointed to be king, chosen by God to rule over all of Israel, and look what he had done! How could he possibly expect good to come from this? But Nathan helped David see himself and to see what he had done. Unlike the emperor who continued to parade around with no clothes, David repented.

Psalm 51 may well have been his words at this time: “Have mercy on me, O God…for I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me…Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me…Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.”

You don’t have to be a poet to tell stories that transform the imagination, to put a new and right spirit in others. By virtue of our baptism, Christians are already armed with stories that can radically witness to the goodness of God’s future. As a Christian, you’ve heard the story of God’s love and grace, a story of Christ’s incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. You already know a story of a beloved lamb that was taken and slaughtered at the hands of the empire, the conviction and transformation that comes through the reciting of that tale. In that story, the lamb is the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whose death was not the end of the story, but rather just the beginning--for through that death came life. Through the resurrection and glorification of that lamb comes the end of a limited imagination and the beginning of a story that tells us we can always be more than our past and can always be transformed in our present. There is now always a story of hope, of light shining into the darkness, of death being defeated and of suffering, pain, and despair lasting only a night because we know and testify to the goodness of joy coming with each and every morning. That is our story. That is the foundation of our prophetic voice, called upon to transform both our neighbor and our neighborhood, powerful enough to change those who hear it, and powerful enough to transform those who tell it.

As you go thorough this week ahead, take some time to really look around you. Where are the places, or the people, that are in need of a little holy meddling? And what may be a bit more difficult question, where might God be doing a little holy meddling with you?