

“The Calm in Tamar’s Chaos”
Advent One: Lake Shore Baptist Church
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December 2, 2018

A few years ago I decided the world hadn’t heard enough sermons on biblical genealogies. Wouldn’t you agree? Too many sermons on “Love one another.” Not enough sermons on who begat who. Tragic, really. I decided to remedy the imbalance one year during Advent. Tis the season for long lists of names you can’t pronounce.

So, here we are at Advent, and I find myself once again with that itch—the genealogical itch. Now, there is simply no way I can cover all the names and all the stories in Jesus’ genealogy in the four short weeks of Advent. However, the text itself is helpful here because there are four weeks of Advent AND there are four women—other than Mary, of course—who make an appearance in Matthew chapter one. We know, of course, that every so-and-so who begat so-and-so required a woman’s uterus to do the begetting, but unfortunately, many of those names have been lost to history. But there are four women whom Matthew makes a special point of mentioning and it is to these four women I dedicate this Advent series.

The first woman to make a named appearance in Jesus’ genealogy is Tamar. Remember her? Genesis 38. There are two Tamars in the Hebrew Scriptures. This is Tamar #1, not to be confused with Tamar #2, David’s daughter, who comes later. If you don’t recall Tamar #1, perhaps you remember Judah, brother of Joseph, son of Jacob. Well, Tamar was Judah’s daughter-in-law; she married his first-born son, Er. (Yes, Er was his name.)

Brief recap for you: the marriage to Er did not last long because Er was wicked, and well . . . er . . . he died. As was custom in those days Tamar was passed on to the next brother in line, Onan and their firstborn son would be considered Er’s heir, rather than Onan’s. Only that did not work according to plan because Onan went into Tamar but spilled his seed on the ground, like you do when you don’t want a pregnancy.

So then he died.

Judah had only one son left, whom he promised to Tamar, but never really followed through, and so Tamar eventually took matters into her own hands by disguising herself as a prostitute, sleeping with her father-in-law, and getting pregnant that way.

And you thought a genealogy sermon would be boring. Still, what does any of this have to do with Advent and what does any of this have to do with Jesus? Well, it was a puzzle to me too until I stumbled upon a little known ancient manuscript called *Tamar’s Marital Woes Diary*. Very rare find. Today you will be receiving exclusive access to this treasured document—you and anyone else who finds my sermon online. I will read it to you now:

Dear Diary,

It has been 17 days since Er died. I feel I should be crying, but the truth is we barely knew each other. He was a harsh man, and in the short time we were together, I was shown little kindness. Perhaps in time we could have acclimated to one another, but now I will never find out whether we could harmonize. I don't know if this is grief I am feeling. I feel . . . bereft. Heavy with emptiness—I am empty with what I will never have. I am made heavy by the void of what will never be mine.

I wonder daily if it is possible that even in this season of death, there may yet be life in me. Perhaps I am with child. His child. It is too soon to know. Every morning, the first thing I do on waking is place my hand over my belly and listen, though not with my ears. I don't know what I am listening for. A mother's intuition? My own mother always knew before any outward signs. How did she do that?

Dear Diary,

Forty-eight days and my womb remains silent. I no longer put my hand on my belly and listen. I use my hands to cover my face and weep. No husband. No child. I am alone.

Dear Diary,

Now that the time of ritual mourning has long passed, arrangements are being made on my behalf. Supposedly life moves on whether or not our hearts agree to it. I will be given to Er's brother, as is custom, so that together we will produce an heir for Er, even after his departure from this earth. It is now our duty—the second-born son and I—to continue the firstborn of Judah's line, and while I understand the importance, I tell my mother I don't feel ready for this. She tells me not to listen to my feelings or I will end up crazy. "A woman must do what is right for her family," she says.

I retort with bitterness, "What family?"

Her look is full of reproach. "Judah's family is your family now. You have a duty to be loyal. It does not matter whether you think you are ready. A woman is always ready."

Tomorrow, I meet Onan. All the family is praying we will conceive, so that the grief of losing one's firstborn son may be assuaged. I am nervous.

Dear Diary,

It is 247 days since my first husband died, 89 days since Onan passed away. There is still no child. But of course, I knew there would be no child with Onan. He came in scowling and reeking of sweat, then refused me the chance to conceive, though he did not hesitate to take his

pleasure. I am too ashamed to tell anyone what happened. I think God was displeased with him, and that is why he died, but I dare not voice my suspicions to anyone. It would disgrace the whole family: *two* wicked sons in a row.

Meanwhile I think this town is starting to suspect I am a cursed woman—that every man who touches me will die. *I* am starting to suspect I am a cursed woman. I try to remind myself that I have done nothing wrong, that it was their own sins that caused their doom. But I see the way people look at me now. I see the hushed whispering that suddenly halts as soon as I enter a room. I know what they think of me. And some days I wonder if they are right. Surely God is not pleased with me.

And yet, I live. *I am still alive*, as if there were more to this sad story of mine, yet to be told. I am alive, as if there were still a purpose for the existence of these bones. Who knows? Perhaps God will relent and show me mercy.

Dear Diary,

My father-in-law is a kind man. Despite the misgivings he must have about me, Judah has promised me Shelah, his third son. I wish I could reassure him that he is right to trust me; that no harm will come to Shelah on account of me. But there is nothing I can say without incriminating his other sons, and so I remain silent, except to express my gratitude. I will live in my father's house until Shelah is of age. It shouldn't be long.

The rumors about Shelah is that he is a good man. In my heart I believe him to be more tender, more steadfast than his brothers. Perhaps *he* is my purpose, my destiny, and I had to endure all this heartache in order to get to the right man. For the first time in a long time, I feel hope. I even feel ready.

Dear Diary,

It has been 568 days since Er died, 410 since Onan passed, and 362 since Judah promised Shelah to me. Shelah is more than of age by now, and I am wondering what the hold up is. My heart is growing weary, and my womb is growing cold.

Dear Diary,

936 days I have been without a husband. I have lived in my father's house well over two years, waiting for Shelah. I spend my days making clothes for the little one I hope to have, but today I ripped out the seams and started over. There was nothing wrong with the garment; it is just that my hands needed something to do, and one can only make so many clothes.

Dear Diary,

I have waited so long for Shelah that the awful truth is beginning to sink in. Judah doesn't want me touching his son. I have the stench of death on my skin, and he is afraid. Judah will keep me from Shelah as long as he possibly can.

It is worse even than that. Today I heard a rumor in the village that confirms my fears. Gossip has it that Judah is making quiet plans to send Shelah off in search of a wife from another city—a woman of better breeding, a woman with less of a reputation for dead husbands. I am doomed. No one will ever want me now—a used woman, a rejected woman, a barren woman, a cursed woman. Before long, an old woman.

Dear Diary,

Would you believe me if I told you my mother has been scheming? My own mother, the epitome of submission and self-sacrifice has been plotting to save me from permanent childlessness and misfortune. I suppose watching her daughter suffer is changing her approach to life. She has this crazy idea. Absurd I tell you. My aunts and a few of my cousins are in on it too.

I am wondering whether to go along with it. I worry that it will make me wicked, that God will strike me dead if I do it. My eldest aunt, the blunt one, tells me I might as well be dead already—the way I have no promise of a future as it is, the way I mope around the house in despair, the way I spend my days ripping out seams as fast as I sew them. My mother says a woman takes risks, that there are times a woman must act on behalf of her own welfare. I give her a look of bewilderment—is this really *my* mother? I ask her what she could possibly know about risk-taking. She is the most boring, obedient woman I'd ever met. She does not answer me. She only winks, asks me to trust her.

They are telling me Judah needs to learn his lesson. I am telling them I am not God, and it is not my job to teach him anything. They are saying, "If not you, then who?" I am saying, "This is dangerous!" They are saying, "What have you got to lose?" I am realizing, nothing. I have nothing to lose.

Dear Diary,

Today is the day. In the flurry of preparation, I've lost count of how many days it's been since Er died, but I do know today is the day we enact our plot. I am trembling with terror, but I am alive with purpose and alert with anticipation. I haven't sewn in weeks.

Dear Diary,

It worked. Our plan worked. At least, Stage One worked. Judah mistook me for a prostitute on the road and came into me. He had no form of payment on him, so, as planned, I asked for his ring, his staff and his cord as promise of payment, and then I disappeared.

Now we wait. Wait to see if I am with child. I am giddy and nervous with anticipation. Half-afraid it will happen. Half-afraid it won't.

Even some of the men in the family are in on it. A few of them have promised to insist no prostitute ever sits on this road, if Judah comes looking. We don't want him paying the wrong woman by mistake.

Dear Diary,

Judah sent someone looking for me. Well, not for me exactly, but for *her*, the woman he slept with. They could not find her.

Also, I am with child. I am certain of it now.

Dear Diary,

Now that I am with child, I am beginning to regret this scheme tremendously. There is life within me, and I am absolutely delirious with joy. But what if Judah kills me when he finds out? Before I did not care if I died. My life was disposable, even to me.

But now it is different. There is a life inside of me, and whoever this little person is, I must protect him or her. What will I do if Judah condemns me? I must act with confidence and calm—*make him* hear me out.

Dear Diary,

Word has gotten to Judah about me—the real me—that I have prostituted myself and am pregnant. He is livid. He wants me burned to death immediately. I am sending him word that this is his child I bear, and as proof I send his own staff, cord, and signet, which he gave to me that night. I have no sense of how he will react when he learns the truth.

This is all happening too fast. I am not ready. Not ready at all. Momma says, "A woman is always ready." I wipe my eyes with my sleeve, and stand a little taller so I can look her in the eye and try to be ready. I have never before noticed how tall my mother is. Whatever happens, she is with me.

Dear Diary,

My life has been spared! Judah himself has said it, that I was more right than he. In my house there is much rejoicing. Mostly I am filled with relief.

My belly swells with pride and with life.

Dear Diary,

It's a boy!

And another boy!

I gave birth to twins today. I could not believe it.

In all this long drama, God has always been silent. Never have I heard him speak. Never have I known what God was thinking, what God thought of me, what God wanted me to do. But today, during labor, I put my hand on my belly and listened, though not with physical ears. I don't know what I was listening for, but I heard the voice of an angel.

God said to me that there is a purpose in the stubborn existence of these bones of mine. God said that my actions—whether they were good or evil, brave or conniving—either way, they have been redeemed and rewarded. God said that good comes from my body; that my womb and my ways have produced the beginnings of a miracle, that my lineage will be blessed, that “from now on all generations will call me blessed, that the Mighty One has done great things for me, holy is his name. His mercy is on them that fear him, from generation to generation. He has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly.” (*Mary's Magnificat, Luke 2:48-53*)

That's me! I am the lowly one who has been lifted up. By God's mercy I have been remembered.

But it's not just about me. It is about mercy for the world. This is the whisper I heard in my belly.

And shockingly, *I* am a channel for that mercy. A vessel of the grace that is to come. Me, the bereft one, the barren one, I now carry mercy, I now birth hope. I am showing with life. From now on I represent the God who works in surprising ways through unlikely people. I knew my story wasn't over, but I did not know I would be the small beginning of a much larger story to come.

One day there will be yet another baby, and through him all people will know they have been redeemed. “My soul doth magnify the Lord! My spirit rejoices in God my Savior!” (*Luke 2:47*)

Postscript: I (Kyndall) first explored writing Tamar's diary a few years back, before I had any children of my own, before, for example, I unexpectedly overnight became the mom of two. Needless to say, the whole twin birth part of her story stuck out to me a little more this time around. THIS was Tamar's “peaceful” ending?

I don't have to tell you that Lake Shore's Advent theme this year, “All is Calm,” strikes many of us as a bit far-fetched. Just take a look at the world around us! And you can probably guess how

“calm” things are in my house right now with a ten-month old and a seven-month old, one extraverted cat and an eighty-pound dog.

As I reflect this year on Tamar’s happy ending—the birth of her twin boys—I am reminded how God’s peace is not of this world as Jesus tells us in John 14. Tamar’s whole life was anything but calm. Chaos after chaos, death after death, risk after risk. And yet, somehow, in the midst of all that crazy, God had not forgotten her.

There is, I think, a tiny seed of calm to be found deep within, even amidst crazy times. Maybe you call it the still small voice of God. Maybe you call it the sheer quiet power of love. Maybe you only ever know of its stillness in brief moments between the merry-go-round of the hours. But it is there, the calm. There in the smell of a baby’s skin. There in the promise of life to come. There in the way the sun rises so powerfully but silently. There in the comforting presence of a friend. There in a memory that makes you smile. There in the sound of music or the color of the fall leaves.

This year I am expecting my Advent to be chaotic. After all, waiting is rarely a twiddle-your-thumbs kind of boring. Waiting is more often tumultuous, confusing, and wild. But as I wait and wade through the uncertainty of these times, I also look for the calm moments of grace, of promise, of hope. May you, my friends, be aware that even in this present chaos, there is grace enough for you. Amen.