

“Bathsheba’s Story”
Advent Four: Lake Shore Baptist Church
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Nothing quite says Christmas Eve’s Eve like a sermon about Bathsheba. Bathsheba is the last woman’s name mentioned in Jesus’ genealogy in Matthew chapter one—other than Jesus’ mother, Mary, of course. As we wrap up this series on the four women of Advent, I’d like to remember not just one woman’s story today, but two—another woman who shows up in David’s lineage. On the first Sunday of Advent, we remembered Tamar #1, from Genesis 39. Today we remember Tamar #2, from 2 Samuel 13, along with Bathsheba, David’s wife. I think it makes a lot of sense to tell their stories together. So, step back in time with me, and let’s begin:

“Tamar, I’m here,” I say gently as I enter her room. She is nonresponsive. I do not wait for an invitation but sit beside her. Her body heaves a sigh; her brow is furrowed in pain; she does not want to look me in the eye.

My feelings toward her are maternal. She grew up with my children, and they all share a father. I’ve never felt anything but affection towards David’s other children. Children deserve to be loved, no matter who their mothers or fathers are.

I’ve spent a lot of time with Tamar through the years, watching out for her when her own mother was busy with the king. Today I feel a stronger bond with her than ever. I want her to know I am here, in spirit as well as body, but I do not know how to bring up what has happened. I sit quietly. She returns silence with silence.

Finally I ask, “Do you want to talk about it?”

She doesn’t answer. Only laughs bitterly. “Did you know when I was a little girl I *hated* my name?”

First, I am caught off guard at the change of topic. Next, I want to tell her she should try being called *Bathsheba*, but I hold my tongue.

She is smiling in a disturbing sort of way. “What kind of mother names her daughter after *Tamar*?”

“Why, Tamar was in the lineage of King David!” I retort. I feel this discussion is irrelevant, but I am sucked into the argument in spite of myself. I’ve always felt a bit partial to the heroines of the Israelite faith, so I rise to the historical Tamar’s defense. “Everyone knows Tamar, mother of Perez. She is a revered woman. I’m sure your mother wanted to name you after someone special.”

“Why not Miriam? Why not Deborah? But no, I am Tamar. The woman who prostituted herself with her father-in-law. This used to upset me. I felt ashamed of my own name.” Tamar is laughing loudly, unnaturally. I give her a quizzical stare.

“Don’t you see the joke?” she chides. “I used to *resent* being her namesake, thinking myself *so much better* than *her*. I, the daughter of a king, deserved a better name. And now I am worse off than she! I have lost my honor forever. I will have no husband, no child. I am . . .” she falters “. . . a spoiled woman. Any chance at a life is gone forever.” At last, the laughter halts, and Tamar shuts her eyes tightly, as if to block something out.

I reach to touch her shoulder, but she jerks away from me. I wait. Then I speak, with a heart full of tenderness for this wounded soul. “I . . . I know the pain you are feeling.”

She scoffs. “You know, huh? You know what it is like to be . . . to be taken, to be . . .” (she brings her voice to a whisper) “raped by your half-brother?”

I nod empathetically, “Not exactly.”

She is getting angry now, but the tears are streaming in earnest down her face. “Do you know what it is like to be *raped*, then have your own father do *nothing*? Nothing to uphold your honor! Nothing to reprimand the one who used you? Do you know what that’s like?! How it feels? How it aches?” The desperate loneliness of her grief seems to suck the room of oxygen.

I try to breathe. “Believe it or not, I do sorta know how you feel . . .” I let this sink in. “And Tamar? I think I know why the king does nothing.”

Tamar is surprised. She was expecting sympathy perhaps, but not information. “What do you mean? What about it? Do you mean he does nothing because Amnon is his favorite son?”

“I . . . I could be wrong, but I believe there’s more to it than that. That is partly why I came to see you today. So you would know. So you could understand your father’s silence.”

Tamar is intrigued. I am uncomfortable. I doubt whether I should ever have come here. I dread what I am about to say. But if anything I say could help her . . . I spend so long second-guessing myself that Tamar prods me. “What is there to understand?” she wants to know.

“First, I must tell you a story. It begins many, many years ago, before I met your father. Tamar, I am a widow. Did you know?”

Tamar is incredulous. She has never heard about this part of my life, which is no surprise. Such stories do not get repeated. I continue.

Before David, I was married to Uriah, a Hittite who served in the king’s army. He was faithful, trustworthy man, and we were passionate about one another. I ached badly for children, but we had trouble conceiving.

Every month, my body's blood would flow out, and my hope of a child was thwarted again. At the end of every cycle, I would imagine the ritual bathing to be a scrubbing away of the lingering disappointment. Stepping out of the water was starting fresh. I was new with possibility.

One month, Uriah had left for war when disappointment hit again. The blood came, and reliably, so did the tears. When the time for bathing came, I could not work up the courage to make it hopeful. Maybe it was the fact that Uriah was gone and may not return for months. We couldn't try again for a baby for who knows how long. My tears mingled with the warm water. No matter how I scrubbed, the grief stuck with me. I lingered there, full of sadness.

To my surprise, I had just finished wiping my body and my eyes dry when a messenger came to the door. Said the king wanted to see me. What could the king possibly want with me . . . unless perhaps —God forbid it!—to tell me that Uriah had been wounded in battle or worse . . . I would not let myself think of it. I frantically searched for alternative explanations for this unexpected summons. Perhaps Uriah was being honored for bravery in battle! He was, after all, faithful to a fault. Such loyalty, and in a foreign man at that! Perhaps he was finally being recognized! I tried to believe this, but with every step towards the palace, my heart was sinking lower and lower into my stomach, felt as if it might just drop right out of me and plop like a stone on the ground.

On entering the palace and being greeted by the king, I was caught off guard by his amiable smile and friendly ease with me, as if we'd been childhood friends. I had expected the great, honorable, legendary king of Israel to be more . . . I don't know . . . aloof and stately. He was casual, personable. I was confused. Surely he was not about to tell me my husband was dead—not with that kind of smile on his face. It was almost a smirk, as if we were playing a game only known to him.

I kept waiting for him to bring up Uriah and news from the warfront, but he did not. Instead he asked about my day, complimented my dress, told me about his recent accomplishments, made jokes, teased me until I blushed. You would not have thought a war was going on at all, not with the way he seemed to be enjoying conversation. I tried to laugh as best I could, but it all seemed so strange that my laughter was forced, my smile wooden, but King David did not seem to notice my unease. I felt very uncomfortable, and I wished Uriah were with me. He would know what to do, what to say to a king.

At one point, the king reached up and brushed his hand across my face. I blinked in confusion. "Bet you've never seen the home of a king?" he was saying, and he grabbed me for a tour. Before I knew what was happening, the king was showing me his chambers, and then he was picking me up like a child and placing me on the bed, laughing. I began to panic. The king wouldn't do anything wrong, I tried to tell myself. But why was he touching my hair? I wanted to ask what he was doing, but he was the king and I could not find my words. Next he was lifting up my skirts. I was shuddering, and I was crying, but he did not notice.

I went home straight after in a disheveled mess. I didn't eat for days. I couldn't sleep. When I tried to get up and carry on with life as usual, I found I was so sick I could barely function. Before long, I discovered I was pregnant.

Pregnant! What would I do now? It seemed like a cruel trick—all that trying to conceive and suddenly I was with child after one unsolicited encounter. Oh how I moaned and wept. Uriah would know immediately the child was not his. But how could I tell him the truth? The truth about his king, the man he so loyally served? Would he even believe me? Would I be risking my life, to tell such a tale about the king himself? It'd be his word against mine . . .

After much agony, I decided to write the king and tell him of my condition. Maybe, if he knew there was a child, he would see fit to intervene . . . to, to help somehow. I didn't know what else to do. Maybe the king would know how to fix this. Maybe he could explain things to Uriah . . . I was holding out hope for a miracle . . . but nothing could have prepared me for what happened instead.

*Within days of my sending the note, Uriah was dead. They called it a war casualty, but of course I knew better. I was stunned. I was devastated. I was distraught. I was bewildered beyond all reckoning. What human being could do such a thing to an innocent man? How could **that** be the way to "fix it"? Some days I blamed myself. If only I had not written that note to the king, perhaps my husband would still be alive. I tried to console myself that I never could have guessed such an outcome. Despite what had happened to me, I still believed it would help things to tell the king, that God's Chosen One would surely come to my aid . . .*

Eventually King David made a public show of comforting the poor widow of Uriah, the Hittite, who'd been slain in battle, and invited her into his home. The people found it romantic. My friends were delighted I would be a queen. I was despondent. What choice did I have?

None of course. I had no choice. No more choice than you do, my daughter, Tamar. For what has happened to you cannot be undone, and you are not allowed any recompense for your sorrows. I know this, because I have lived it.

I have been so intent on telling my story that I just now focus on Tamar's face, to see what she is thinking. There is shock there—also, pain. Empathy too, which makes my eyes water. Her compassion makes me feel as if a huge weight has been lifted from my body. I am not as sure about this next part, but I feel I must say it, and her kind eyes give me permission to continue.

"I tell you all this, my sweet Tamar, because I know why the king does not confront Amnon. The king is thinking, *like father, like son*. He cannot bear to confront the animal inside himself by confronting the one inside his son."

"He was repentant once, you know," I add, "when challenged by the prophet Nathan. But he does not have the courage to be Nathan to his own son because he knows he's got blood on his hands. He cannot endure facing the truth about what happened to you, his daughter, because he cannot endure knowing that he has created more men like himself."

Tamar is reflective. "How do you know this?"

"I just . . . know. Sometimes women know things." After a moment's thought I add, "I imagine for him this whole tragic affair with you is a little like entering a brothel and finding your own

daughter among the women of the night. You like to think of these women as willing participants, but *when it is your daughter*, you cannot help but notice the dark circles under her eyes, the bruises on her arm, the defeated look in her eye, the cry for help that is etched between the wrinkles on her brow. But what can you do? Who can you beat up in her honor? For she is among the women, but you, you are among the patrons. There would be no business for her violations if you were not a customer. You are a customer, breeding more customers with your silence, but to speak up would be your ruin.”

Tamar shakes her head. “Sometimes a man needs ruining.”

I take her hand. “I wish the king was willing to be ruined for you.”

She squeezes my hand in return. “I wish the same for you!”

I look into her eyes. “Tamar, we need a better king.”

Tamar: “Isn’t that the truth? God have mercy!”

Me: “I pray for one every day. May God send a new king.”

Tamar: “Maybe someday.”

Me: “We can only hope.”

“How long O Lord?!” Tamar cries passionately.

“How long indeed?” I echo. Spontaneously we erupt in priest-like prayers and woman-like moans. Between our groans we cry, “How long, O Lord, must we wait? How long will you forget? How long must we bear pain in our hearts and sorrow in our souls?”

Tamar laments, “No one even knows what happened to us! My father will be remembered for his battles and his victories, but no one will remember us.”

I tell her, “But my child, I remember. *I* know what happened to you. And you know what happened to me, because now I’ve told you. Now that I’ve told *someone*, perhaps we should never stop telling. Perhaps someday the world can be a different place. Perhaps someday, God will come to our aid. Perhaps God will hear our prayers and send a savior.”

And it is with that hope that we continue to pray all our days, and with the passing of time, we begin to feel our hope is not in vain. We do not know where this assurance comes from. We do not know how or when, but we feel it, know it deep within that someday, somehow God will send a very different kind of king. We can only pray the world will be ready to receive him. He will be a man willing to be ruined on behalf of the people. If only the people will respond in like courage. He will be a king who comes not with domination but with love, not with force but with mercy. O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel. Amen.