



**Tamar**

**Genesis 38:6-30**

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November 28, 2021

Again, it's a joy to be gathered with you as we kick off the season of Advent this morning.

The season of Advent is an intentional season in the life of the church that invites us to prepare for the coming arrival of Christ. Though the societal buzz around Christmas often makes it difficult to fully engage in the season of Advent, the intention of these four weeks leading up to Christmas is *not* to celebrate the birth of Christ. In the Church, Advent is not a celebratory season. Advent is similar to Lent – it is designed as a season of penitence, during which we acknowledge the brokenness of the world that would beg God to send Christ into the world.

As the advent candles are a marker of the season, Advent is a season of darkness, in which we give thanks that God is sending the Christ child to be the light the world so desperately needs. The season of Advent reaches its climax on Christmas Eve as we turn down the house lights and raise our individual candles, acknowledging that as Christ is born, the collective light of Christ in each of us can blot out even the darkest of broken worlds.

Though there is much that can be celebrated throughout the holiday season – a season that seemingly spans from Halloween through the New Year – to fully comprehend God's work in Christ, we must spend some time framing the arrival of Christ in its Biblical context. Our broad hallmark brushstrokes that make the Nativity scene and Christ's arrival some kind of picturesque and silent night is far from a Biblical reality. There is a back story to Christ's arrival, a history of human deception and frailty, a world in need of a Savior. It is this brokenness, this messiness of human existence, that makes the arrival of Christ so life-changing, so world altering, so meaningful and impactful.

During this Advent season, we're going to be marking and preparing for the coming arrival of Christ with the stories of five women. In the scripture Darrin read for us this morning, we heard the genealogy of Jesus. In this text, the apostle names the 41 generations of Jesus' family tree going back to Abraham. In this list of grandparents great, we hear some names we likely recognize, like Isaac and Jacob, King David and King Solomon, Amos and Joseph. Perhaps not surprising given the culture's treatment of women at the time, Jesus' genealogy is traced only through the men that came before him; his tracing back to Abraham follows the line of the men in his family tree. However, five times in this listing, the woman of the relationship is named. Just five times the woman who gave birth to the next generation is highlighted.

These names are not listed without purpose. And so, as Matthew's listing invites, we're going to do some ancestry.com like investigation to figure out, who were these women? And what does their inclusion in Jesus' genealogical listing offer as we prepare for Christ's branch of the tree to sprout?

Our first focus is on Tamar, who gave birth to Perez and Zerah, two of the sons of Judah.

I had originally intended to have Darrin read the story of Tamar this morning, a text that is found in Genesis 38. But the text is ... well, it's not PG. And, even understanding the context behind the story, Genesis 38 seems really out of character for the Biblical text.

The story of Tamar in Genesis 38 is an interjecting story to a longer and more robust story about Joseph and his brothers. Joseph was the 11<sup>th</sup> son of Jacob, and he was favored by his father. You'll remember him by his technicolor dreamcoat. Joseph's brothers didn't appreciate that he received so much more affection than they, and so they plotted to get rid of him. The brother who derived the plan to sell Joseph into slavery was Judah. Judah – who is named in Jesus' genealogy.

After the brothers sold Joseph into slavery, they convinced their father that he had been killed. So, quick recap, Judah has thought up and enacted a plan to get rid of his youngest brother because he was jealous of how much his father favored that brother, and then Judah convinced his father that this favored brother is dead. (To be clear, Joseph isn't dead, he's been sold into slavery. Judah and his brothers profited off of the sale of their brother.)

Immediately after the father learns of Joseph's supposed death, we arrive in Genesis 38, which begins by offering, "It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and settled near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; he married her and went in with her."

Judah has sold his brother, convinced his father his brother is dead, and then used the proceeds from the sale of his brother to move away from the family. Keep in mind, Judah hails from Israel, but he doesn't stay in the land of Israel. He moved outside the region of Israel and marries a Canaanite woman.

One might think that Judah's story can't get any worse ... just wait.

With his wife Shua, Judah has three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. When the oldest arrives at marrying age, Judah takes a wife for Er, whose name is Tamar. The text notes for us that Judah takes this wife for Er – this is an arranged marriage, not for love, but for family legacy. In the historical context of this story, women were treated as the property of their fathers until they were bartered off in marriage to become the property of their husband. Er had little, if any say, in his marriage. He was given Tamar for no other reason than to birth an heir to carry on the family name.

However, as the scripture reads, "Er was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death." "This is the first individual God kills directly in the entire Bible."<sup>i</sup> It's harsh. But are we surprised by his deviance, given he is the oldest son of Judah? Judah hasn't been the most spitting image of righteousness.

Just as quickly as she was married, Tamar is now widowed. If there's anyone in the near east society who has less of a status than women in general, it's a widow. She now has no one to care for her – not her father, nor her husband, and in Tamar's situation, she doesn't even have a son.

Because widows were so vulnerable in this society, there were specific rules and requirements to help ensure widows were taken care of ... or, at least that's what we want to think about these laws. One of these rules is called the Levirate Law. This law is canonized in Deuteronomy 25. It states that, should a man die without a son to care for his widow, the man's brother should marry the widow. One might think this is to ensure care for the widow, but in reality, this law was designed to ensure that the family property wasn't lost with no heir to receive it.

With Er (Judah's eldest son) gone, Judah no longer had a first born son to inherit the lion's share of family property. So, according to the Levirate Law, Judah's obligation was to give Tamar to his second son, Onan. If Onan and Tamar had a son together, the son would be considered the heir of Er (confusing, right?) ... even though the child would have been Onan's son, the son would have the inheritance rights as if he were the son of Judah's first-born, Er.

Onan knew these rules, and knew that should he have a son, the son would be entitled to more of his father's estate than him. Should he not have a son, his father would have no direct heir to receive the bulk of the estate, and he, Onan, might receive more. Yet, Onan was required by the Levirate Law to marry Tamar and to give her a child. The biblical text tells us that Onan would go in to the marriage chambers, but he refused to be with Tamar – you can read Genesis 38 for yourself, the text is NSFW in letting us know exactly how he refused Tamar.

Onan's refusal to give Tamar a child angered the Lord, and the Lord put him to death too.

Well, Judah had a third son, Shelah, who should have, by the Levirate Law, become Tamar's husband. But at this point, Judah is weary of giving Tamar to his third son after the first two died. Judah is worried that Tamar might be the cause of their deaths. The faithful and righteous thing to do, if following the customary and faith-based laws of the time, was for Judah to give Tamar to Shelah. He refuses, making up the excuse that Shelah isn't yet old enough for marriage. So, Judah sends Tamar back to her father's house, promising that when Shelah is old enough, Judah will call for Tamar to come and be married to Shelah. By refusing her to marry Shelah while promising her a future marriage, "Judah ensures Tamar's perpetual vulnerability."<sup>ii</sup>

Tamar knows that Judah is lying. She knows that she is being mistreated, and refused what is the customary practice of the time. She can see the injustice in the situation that is being forced upon her. And she has no power to stop Judah ... at least, not at first.

In a short season, Tamar learns that Judah's wife, Shua, has died. Tamar devises a plan to get what she believes is rightfully hers, the security of living within Judah's estate.

The text tells us that she "put off her widow's garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah." When it says she wrapped herself up,

Pastor Tom Fuerst says, she has made herself “nice and pretty.” She’s trying to attract Judah. And it works.

As Judah passes her on the road, he takes note of her. Because her face is veiled, he can’t see who it is. He doesn’t know it’s Tamar. But, thinking her to be a prostitute, Judah approaches her and asks if they might be together. Tamar asks what he might give her for such a deed – what will he pay? Judah promises a kid from his flock – a goat from the farm. Tamar agrees to the payment, but since Judah doesn’t have a goat with him, she requires some form of pledge – something she can hold on to until he’s able to return to her with a goat. She wants some collateral.

As a pledge, Judah offers her his signet, cord, and staff. It’s like he’s given her his Social Security Card and Passport.<sup>iii</sup> These are identifiers that can prove she’s been with Judah.

After Judah returns home, he sends a servant to take a goat to the woman. His servant goes out to find her, inquiring about the prostitute who had been on the road to Enaim. But none of the locals know who she might have been. They can’t locate her. Judah is hesitant to push too much, because he knows he was wrong for sleeping with her in the first place. If he asks too many questions, people will surely begin to wonder about why he wants to find her so intently. So Judah scoffs and says, “Let her keep the things as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at.”

Like Judah’s relationship with his brother, and his father, and Tamar and Shelah, and now with a prostitute he doesn’t even know, Judah clearly cares more about himself and his perception and power than the well-being of those around him.

A few months go by, and Tamar is pregnant with Judah’s child. Judah finds out Tamar is pregnant, but doesn’t know it’s his child. It would have been against societal allowances for Tamar to conceive from another man – she is still considered family property under Judah’s estate. Judah is very upset, and calls for her to be publicly burned to death. He’s so mad at her for having prostituted herself out, he wants her dead. But of course he didn’t think twice about his own promiscuity.

Tamar has someone send to Judah the signet, cord, and staff, saying, “it was the owner of these items that is the father of my child.”

Only then, after being caught in the act, did Judah finally say, “She is more right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.” Tamar was indeed carrying Judah’s child – twins to be sure. Perez and Zerah. Perez would be the son that continued the lineage of Jesus.

After this story ends, Genesis 39 returns right back to the story of Joseph. This is the only information in the Bible we have of Tamar.

Tamar is the first woman named in the lineage of Jesus, and what a story it is.

You may be asking yourself, what in Advent’s name, does this story have to do with our preparing for the birth of Christ? I want to offer three quick observations as we begin this season of Advent.

First, the story of humanity is messy. The story of Christ, the story of God's people, is messy. "Jesus did not come into a perfect family filled with perfect people who did not need saving. He came into a messed up family with messed up people who needed a Savior just like you and me."<sup>iv</sup> Sometimes we think we aren't good enough for Christ, or that we need to skip ahead to the glory of Christmas Eve because our brokenness makes us unredeemable. We want to skip the hard invitation to acknowledge our need for a Savior, and just celebrate the arrival of the Savior. Hear this: if Tamar and Judah are good enough to be part of Jesus' lineage with this kind of deception and family drama, I assure you, your story and my story are redeemable too.

Second, Jesus comes to bring light to the darkness. Judah is not alone in his double standard take on prostitution. As Scholar Walter Brueggemann offers, "Tamar committed the kind of sin the "good people" prefer to condemn – engaging in deception and illicit sex and bringing damage to a good family."<sup>v</sup> This still happens today ... just check the laws in Texas. Judah was ready to burn Tamar at the stake because of prostitution, but he never once brought accusations of deception and impropriety against himself. As God's light in the world, Jesus comes to make plain and clear that which is unrighteous and unfaithful. There are no double standards in Jesus' kingdom. As the end of Genesis 38 makes very clear, Tamar is the one who brings righteousness into Judah's family – she is the one who is righteous in this branch of the Jesus' family tree. As we discussed last week, Jesus care first and foremost about the truth, and he will bring light to the deception and corruption of the world.

Finally, the story of Christ is the incarnate proclamation that God flips the world, exalting the poor and lowly, and humbling the wealthy and powerful. Jesus doesn't enter the world as a king riding on a stallion, he's born in the farm house, the stable or the crawl space, which was all that was left when Joseph and Mary arrived at the family estate in Bethlehem. Tamar is witness to this grand reversal. She, who by societal and cultural norms, had no power at the start of this story, is the one who ends up wielding all of the power. Tamar is a Canaanite – someone who was hated among the people Israel – a woman whose people were driven from the land of Judea so the Israelites could claim the promised land. And Tamar is a Gentile – she is not a woman of Jewish faith. She's an outsider from God's covenanted people. And yet, Judah's name does not show up in Matthew 1 on Jesus' genealogical list without Tamar. The story of Christ is the story of reversal, of the promise that there are no kings and saviors aside from one – the child who is to be born in Bethlehem. He, who is the truth and the way.

May Tamar's witness and dedication to the work of justice and righteousness lead us as we journey to Christmas in this season of preparation – in this Advent of waiting. Let us prepare for the arrival of the Christ child. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Tom Fuerst. *Underdogs and Outsiders, A Bible Study on the Untold Stories of Advent*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Fuerst.

<sup>iii</sup> Fuerst.

<sup>iv</sup> Fuerst.

<sup>v</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Genesis, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986.