

A Advent 1 11.27.22

Genesis 38:11, 13-26; Matthew 24:36-44

Focus Statement: Bring yourself to Advent because God is here for all of you.

As I mentioned at the start of worship, we're doing a bit of a sermon series for Advent. This year we will be reading through the Gospel of Matthew, so since Matthew starts with a genealogy of Jesus, I thought we might want to start by looking at the glaring outliers in that genealogy and take a closer look at the women Matthew included. And before we get too far into this, let me acknowledge the elephant in the room, the only advantage to the fact that we as of yet have no children who are regular attenders in our congregation is that I can do a sermon series like this one. Because the story of Tamar is not a kid-friendly story. None of the stories we are going to read this Advent are G rated by any means. Tamar is one of the more risqué one—though not the worst, that honor probably goes to Bathsheba, look for her in another two weeks—but all of them have aspects of, would I tell this story to an eight-year-old? But we're all adults here, so let me just name the discomfort you may be feeling and say this, the reason we're reading these stories, the reason Matthew includes these women in Jesus' genealogy is to tell us this: We all have things in our backgrounds that make us uncomfortable, all have parts of ourselves we wish God didn't know about, would like to keep from others. By including these women, all of whom have suspicious sexual histories, three of whom are gentiles, in Jesus' genealogy, Matthew is telling us some important truths about Jesus. First, the gentile part tells us that the story of Jesus is bigger than the story of the Israelites. Jesus himself is not one-hundred percent Israelite, he is a person of mixed parentage, he is himself gentile. Showing us Jesus' gentile heritage reinforces the commandment that the Gospel of Matthew ends on, to go and make disciples of all nations, because Jesus has come to save all people. Whoever you

are, whatever your background, Jesus has come for you. The second, and possibly most important part of the inclusion of these women in particular in Jesus' genealogy is it gets right at the idea that has become all too common in modern Christianity, that followers of Jesus have their lives all together. That there's some sort of moral code we have to meet first, in order to be worthy of Jesus. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, even Mary's inclusion in Jesus' history is this harsh counternarrative to the idea that there is anything any of us could do to be unworthy of God's kingdom. There are some scandalous stories in Jesus' background, and Matthew includes a handful of them in Jesus' genealogy to make the point that God works through unexpected, broken, even scandalous people. God works through women who took initiative, men who made horrible mistakes—again, when we get to Bathsheba, the great King David comes out of that looking, well, not so great is to put in mildly—outsiders, you name it. Jesus' genealogy makes sure, right at the very start of the gospel, that nothing you bring is going to surprise God. You, exactly who you are and as you are, whatever you've through, whatever your story, is part of God's story of salvation.

And the third, and maybe the most important reason to lift up these four women, is that these women are incredible. They are strong and brave and courageous. They are people who were given insurmountable odds, to whom terrible and unfair things happened, and who just kept on going, and who in refusing to fall into the stories of who they were, in refusing to give up on who they knew God saw them to be, paved the way from Abraham to David to Jesus. In each of these instances the lineage of Jesus was at risk of collapsing, and through the bravery of these women, the line of God's salvation continued. Dear people of God, I'm going to go out on a bit of a limb here but let me make the statement that more

than Abraham, Moses, Noah, David, any of the traditional heavy hitters of scripture, the women we are going to read about over these next four weeks are people to admire. So let us start with Tamar.

We talked a few weeks ago about that weird parable where the woman married seven brothers and the Sadducees wondered whose wife she would be in heaven. That is the exact situation Tamar found herself in. Her husband Er died childless, then his brother also died childless. The Judah, out of fear for his third son, refused to marry the boy to Tamar, though that was his legal obligation. Neither did he provide her protection under his household, sending her instead back to her father, where hopefully he would take her in, though her father no longer had any legal obligation to her. In a culture where Tamar's entire legal identity was tied up in the man to whom she was associated, she found herself a non-person. And, not only that, but her first husband Er, Judah's oldest son, also essentially ceased to exist, having died without an heir. Remember, we talked about this in the weird seven husbands parable from a few weeks ago as well, this is a time where your continued life after death was connected to your descendants. Er had none, and at this point neither did Judah. Judah too was putting his own succession at risk. But so anxious was Judah that he couldn't see past his own fear to what could be. He was willing to forgo his future for some sense of security in his present.

And Tamar saved him from that. Tamar saved not only herself, she saved Judah. She took a giant risk, put her own life and reputation on the line, in order to restore honor not only to herself, not only to Er, but to Judah as well. That is why at the end of the story Judah

recognized, “she is more in the right than I” because without Tamar’s bold action, his story would have ended. Instead of being known as the Lion of Judah, and ancestor of the Son of God, the salvation of the world, he would have been the guy who abandoned his daughter-in-law, who cheated his own son out of his inheritance rights, and who ended the covenant made to Abraham of descendants to outnumber the stars.

Dear people of God, in Tamar we see the model of a woman who acted. Who did not sit back and lament the unfairness of those around her, but who instead demanded that which she was legally owed. Tamar’s story tells us that we too can act boldly, we too can take risks, we too can put aside what others might think of us and instead follow the path we know, or at least hope, to be right, trusting that God knows our intentions, regardless of what the world might see. Judah’s friends told him Tamar was “playing the whore” but in every genealogy, scripture records Tamar as the mother of “Perez and Zerah, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab,” an unbroken line until Jesus. Scripture remembers Tamar not as Judah’s neighbors’ saw her but as God saw her, as a crucial link in the chain of salvation history that gets us to Jesus.

Which gets us, rather abruptly, to our Gospel text. And this strange metaphor—M. Eugene Boring, who’s Matthew commentary is one of my favorites, calls even a “bold metaphor” of Jesus coming “like a thief in the night.” Comparing Jesus to a thief, one whom the owner of the house should have been protecting himself against, seems an odd comparison. But the emphasis on this passage seems to be on the urgency and unexpectedness of Jesus’ coming. This passage is a continuation of the one from Luke Jeff read two weeks ago, where Jesus

warned, “many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he,’ and ‘the time is near!’ Do not go after them.” This passage, especially when read alongside Tamar, urges us to be alert, yes, to be ready, but also to be involved and active as we wait. To not sit on the sidelines and wait for God’s coming, but instead to be actively involved in the unfolding of the kingdom. Don’t worry, this passage urges and Tamar models, what others will think of those actions. Think only of what God thinks, of who God knows you to be, what God calls you to do. And the best good news of this story, in our acting, we can have no way of knowing the incredible, long-term effects of those actions. We don’t know, maybe can’t know, how much the risks we take will matter. Tamar could not have known, when she was gambling her reputation on behalf of her husband’s bloodline, that that line would lead directly, thousands of years later but directly, to Jesus. But it did. She couldn’t have known how off based those cruel words of Judah’s neighbors would ring in the ears of future generations. But they did. Dear people of God, in advent we wait for a coming king, and we get a baby in a manger. We cannot always see how our small actions matter in the unfolding of God’s kingdom. But in Tamar and in Jesus we see the promise that God works in unexpected ways and through unexpected people, to bring about salvation. You, we, all of us, are those people. Thanks be to God, who gave us shoulders like Tamar upon which to stand, and who is using us to be just such shoulders upon which the next generation of God’s story will unfold. Amen.