

## BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

Texts on Sunday, November 29, 2020

Genesis 38: 6-26; Mark 13: 33-37

What is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

**T**he story of Tamar and Judah is by no means a traditional reading for Advent One. We do have here, however, a deep connection with the usual Advent theme in Mark's gospel, where Jesus foretells disaster in the cosmos and on earth—"such tribulation as has not been seen"—and the son of man descending on clouds. Yet of that day and hour, warns Jesus,

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. Keep awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn. And what I say to you—I say to all: Keep awake.

Strive to awaken. There's our theme. You may recall from my preaching with Riverside years ago that it seems to me best to tell Bible stories not because they happened, but because they're happening—and because they help. God knows, our times are bringing such tribulation . . . as has not been seen, and God knows, we need help. What to make of Tamar and Judah?

Commentaries all agree that this story is some stranger. A recent one describes it as "a break in the story" which comes from "independent origins." An older one calls the chapter "an interlude in the Joseph story." Something like anger bubbles up in a trusted commentary from the 1950s: "This story is . . . like an alien element suddenly and arbitrarily thrust into a record which it serves only to disturb. Certainly few people would choose this chapter as a basis for . . . preaching." And that passage gets even purpler from there. Well! For many months now Riverside has been listening to the women of the Bible, so let us join the few people who would choose Tamar's story for the Sunday sermon, and listen to learn not what happened, but to learn who we are and how we may be helped in the telling of her tale.

Now, someone did stick this story into the middle of a long narrative a long time ago. Why? The simplest explanation is that it got in here by popular demand. Imagine that the very long Joseph saga had been written down and read in public often enough for people to wonder—Where's Tamar? Put Tamar back in—it doesn't matter where. That story really matters to us.

So who was this "us"? Around 700 B.C., the people of Israel had come to a violent end. An empire to the east destroyed their cities and scattered their ten tribes to the winds. But one tribe was not in those wars. That land was called Judah. It was in Judah that King David built Jerusalem and Solomon his temple. To Judah, Micah and Isaiah and Jeremiah thundered. Only the people of Judah were left to tell the stories we call Old Testament.

The word “Judaism” comes from Judah. So also “Judea.” On Christmas Eve, you’ll hear that name again when someone reads:

A decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled . . . and Joseph went from the city of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem.

The people who demanded the telling of Tamar and Judah were Judah-ites, making certain the children would always know how they came to be who and how they were. So what was it in here that just must be told?

The obvious is that the future of God’s promises hangs on Judah—both on this man Judah and on this land Judah, now that all the other tribes have vanished. To make it into the future, Judah doesn’t need to make war or wealth. He need not dive deep in things divine as his dad did. He has only to raise children well who raise up yet more children. At this one job, the story says, Judah failed. Yes, he fathered three sons, but some carelessness about the future was sown like bad seed in the sons, who did not heed the call to life, and two died. Fearing for the third son, Judah sent his only daughter-in-law Tamar back to her father’s house to wait for him to give her in marriage to his remaining son at the right time. The young widow waited. The right time did not come. Judah’s wife died. He mourned her for a time, but now he is getting on with life. From now on, he will be willing to pay for the pleasure of go-nowhere sex, but Judah is done with the future. And all history is now hanging from a cliff.

Imagine telling your story of “who we are” and “what we’re like” like this: “We have been careless about our future. We’ve paid the dead their due, but we do more for our pleasure than for our posterity. We don’t focus. Now we’re failing. How will we ever change our self-serving ways?” Listen: no nation—nowhere, never—inscribed its stories with self-criticism so severe as did Judah of old. The oracles of the great prophets prove this point well and clearly, but we forget how easily a later generation might have trashed the scrolls of the prophets—just as it has been all too easy for fragile white people to trash the scrolls of slavery and massacre and mass incarceration, to try to make America great again. But Judahites kept theirs. Here, with Judah and Tamar, they confess that it lies in their character to care not at all for their future, but for themselves only. Only in sackcloth and ashes can we see the cracks in the foundation on which our house was built—and must be rebuilt.

Is there help? Not as we expect. Swaddled in widow’s garments, shunned in her father’s house, powerless for the future, Tamar awaits a fate from the hand of Judah. Will he rise to his destiny? Or must she forever face the stares of a town without pity? What would you do? No—What will you do? Though we know that like Judah, we too have been self-serving and careless of the future, we are also like Tamar. Have you not some time felt like her?

Like her, in a church meeting? Like her, in a worship service? Like her, in a voting booth or crying in the street for Black Lives Matter? Like her, have you not felt that old customs and unwritten rules bind you like widow's garments? Like her, have you not felt that your yearning for life—life for your church, life for your nation, life for your cracked and cooking planet—goes suppressed in you, repressed, depressed, unexpressed while someone with too much power and too little care says not here, not now, not over my dead body?

Well, suddenly, Tamar will not take it anymore. No, not another day in service to good old ways that keep her from great. She reminds me of some men in prison I have known, who told how they wore their long sentences in the big house like widow's garments hot and heavy, until the day they got up and determined to grow great. Tamar stands for that intelligence in you by the very grace of God which will not anymore shuffle about with the chores of the church, if the future is not in them; will not anymore merely gripe about "them" since the future is not in them; will not anymore stand for demoralized democracy and the derangement of justice in the hands of go-nowhere men. The future is not in them. Before Tamar leaves her father's house, she is already expecting—expecting something big, something beyond good and evil.

Now, action that is bold is not for that reason good. I am grateful to Maria Popova ([BrainPickings.org](http://BrainPickings.org)) for drawing Friedrich Nietzsche into the drama. She writes that Nietzsche "offers . . . the only charm against the transfiguration of heroism into monstrosity; the one elixir of moral might that both fuels the fight of good against evil and subsumes it." Popova quotes Nietzsche: "What is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil."

Tamar stands for that love. That love can awaken in any of us to use what yearning still stirs in us to run a risk beyond good and evil right in the teeth of carelessness and resistance—in order to take part in what must come. Judah and Tamar, we are them both. Now they meet on the road.

Judah thinks she is a prostitute, and he wants her. No, he wants himself. He wants to feel vital yet with no vital consequence. He offers her a goat in exchange. In the old stories, the goat stands for the ordinary offering to God to try to manage God, while putting little skin in the game. But Tamar, who stands for the future that must come, refuses that ordinary, easy sacrifice. To match her own, she wants his skin in the game: his signet, his cord, his staff. The signet is his name, his identity. The cord is his self-defense, the closure against self-disclosure. The staff is his authority, his power. Tamar requires him to let all this go into her keeping—if he would have his way with her.

Only Tamar acts freely here. Judah acts only from habits of fear and de-

sire. Only Tamar intends the future of Judah. Can't you hear the ancient voices crying out to us? Strive to awaken! You need help from beyond yourselves to become yourselves! Your Judah-nature, so conservative of tradition, will die when crisis comes—unless you let go your old identity, let go your authority, let go your cautious self-defense to join with the vital energies sent you by grace to birth a future.

Now each returns home by a separate way and Judah soon gets news that Tamar is pregnant. Burn her, says he, all of a sudden inflamed with conservative values, with the law. Left to itself, without love, the conservative cast of mind will always use violence to keep its world from changing. When their numbers get big, like Judah, people are ready to torch anything they do not understand. Judah stands for the quasi-religious certainty that the troubling voices of strangers and cultures and people of color and immigrants and Muslims and LGBTQ and . . . must all be burned out its world, where, alas, left to itself, without love, there will come no future.

But before she goes to the stake, Tamar offers Judah a chance to see himself. “Here are signet, cord, and staff,” she writes. “By him whose these are am I with child.” And, by the grace of God, Judah sees. He sees that in the woman’s courage, he has not been left for dead, but can be taken up in great things. Yet to get there, he must surrender in one way more. Will he?

Since Tamar’s package has come to him in private, if she is burned to death, he can retake his old identity, his defenses, and his power at the head of the tribe. Who will know? Truly, no one will know—for all Judah and all the future will perish with her. But if he lets go his old story, his hypocrisy, his reputation, he can live through the love Tamar has, beyond good and evil.

Remember how he chooses: “She is more righteous than I.” This too is in the nature of Judah, and in ours—to change, at the right time. O God, help us to let stir in the loins of our conscience a desire undeterred like Tamar’s for the future that must come. And stir in us also a confession like Judah’s, accepting help from beyond, to begin again in honesty and fruitfulness, with love, regardless how heedless was our terrifying past. Whoever will walk these paths helps inscribe a story so compelling, the generations will tell it and tell it again. Choose, Judah. Choose, church. Choose, Americans all.

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