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Genesis 38

Women of the Hebrew Scriptures: Tamar – Righting Wrongs

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Today's passage from the 38<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis introduces us to Tuh-mar. In the south, we always called her TAY-MAR, but in seminary I learned that I have a habit of emphasizing the wrong syllable. In Genesis, the story Tamar is a weird little interlude at the very start of the Joseph narrative. It creates tension and serves as a cliffhanger.

In chapter 37, the story of God's people shifts in full effect from Isaac (the child of Abraham and Sarah) to his son, Jacob, and his grandchildren. This is not a great introduction to Isaac's descendants. The behavior of Jacob's sons does not inspire hope. They are jealous of Joseph's coat of many colors and take the "brotherly torture" way too far when they throw him into a pit and want to leave him to die. Judah, one of Joseph's brothers, motivated by greed, convinces the other brothers to sell Joseph into slavery for 20 pieces of silver, rather than leaving him to die.

This leads us right into our story here in Chapter 38 – verses 1-26. Here we follow Judah as he moves away from his family to settle and begin his family. This is a shocking passage – depicting very human events and acts and motives. I have tried to tame some of the language down so it is not so graphic, but it is safe to say that this is story could get banned in Florida if it weren't in the bible. Let us listen for God's word, speaking to us this day from

### **Genesis 38: 1-26**

<sup>1</sup>It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and settled near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. <sup>2</sup>There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; he married her. <sup>3</sup>She conceived and bore a son; and he named him Er. <sup>4</sup>Again she conceived and bore a son whom she named Onan. <sup>5</sup>Yet again she bore a son, and she named him Shelah. She was in Chezib when she bore him. <sup>6</sup>Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn; her name was Tamar. <sup>7</sup>But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. <sup>8</sup>Then Judah said to Onan, 'Go to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; provide children for your brother.' <sup>9</sup>But since Onan knew that the children would not be his, whenever he slept with his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground so that he would not give offspring to his brother. <sup>10</sup>What Onan did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and God put him to death also. <sup>11</sup>Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, 'Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up' — for Judah feared that Shelah too would die, like his brothers. So, Tamar went to live in her father's house. <sup>12</sup>After a long time had passed the wife of Judah died; when Judah's time of mourning was over, he went up to Timnah to his sheep-shearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. <sup>13</sup>When Tamar was told, 'Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep', <sup>14</sup>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. She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage. <sup>15</sup>When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute, for she had covered her face. <sup>16</sup>He went over to her at the roadside, and said, 'Come,

let me **lie with you**, for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, 'What will you give me, that you may **lie with me**?' <sup>17</sup>He answered, 'I will send you a kid from the flock.' And she said, 'Only if you give me a pledge, until you send it.' <sup>18</sup>He said, 'What pledge shall I give you?' She replied, 'Your signet and your cord, and the staff that is in your hand.' So, he gave them to her, and **lay with** her, and she conceived by him. <sup>19</sup>Then she got up and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood. <sup>20</sup>When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to recover the pledge from the woman, he could not find her. <sup>21</sup>He asked the townspeople, 'Where is the temple prostitute who was at Enaim by the wayside?' But they said, 'No prostitute has been here.' <sup>22</sup>So he returned to Judah, and said, 'I have not found her; moreover, the townspeople said, "No prostitute has been here."' <sup>23</sup>Judah replied, 'Let her keep the things as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at; you see, I sent this kid, and you could not find her.' <sup>24</sup>About three months later Judah was told, 'Your daughter-in-law Tamar has been an **adulteress**; moreover she is pregnant as a result of **adultery**.' And Judah said, 'Bring her out, and let her be burned.' <sup>25</sup>As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, 'It was the owner of these who made me pregnant.' And she said, 'Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.' <sup>26</sup>Then Judah acknowledged them and said, 'She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.' And he did not lie with her again.

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord

**Thanks be to God**

### **Women of the Hebrew Scriptures: Tamar – Righting Wrongs**

This is definitely one of those passages where the "*Thanks be to God*" in response to "Friends this is the Word of the Lord" kinda feels like a question. Are we thankful for these words – this tough story? Are we thankful the authors are telling us this story about unjust systems that demonstrate the privilege of patriarchy and the powerlessness of womanhood in biblical times? It's important to remember that stories like this are included for a reason and are told in the way they are captured for a reason. So, let's see what we learn about God and God's people here.

Judah leaves his family of birth to go hang out with his buddy, Hirah the Adullamite who becomes Judah's wing-man. I imagine that Judah and Hirah are hanging out – those unruly young adults who are out looking to see what's up when Judah sees and then marries "the daughter of a certain Canaanite named Shua."

From the start, this story feels off to me – it feels like an example of toxic masculinity. The women are only referenced in relation to the men responsible for them and those men don't appear to have a lot of redeeming characteristics – The only woman who is named in this passage is Tamar. Judah has three sons – Er, Onan and the much younger, Shelah. Judah marries Er to Tamar. Not long after getting married, Er dies. The text tells us that Er was not a good guy, in fact, the text says he was wicked, so The Lord put him to death. Based on this description of Er, I am guessing that married life has not been great for Tamar, but with his death, life gets way more complicated for her.

You see, they had not yet had children so the custom of Levirate Marriage would have been enacted. If you don't know, this was the practice where the oldest brother of a deceased man would marry his sister-in-law in order to produce male heirs for his brother so the family line would continue. In these times, a woman's purpose was to produce an heir. Without children, and specifically without a son, a widow's place in society was very risky.

In a just society this practice was meant to ensure the dead man's family line continued, but it was also supposed to protect the widow. So in Tamar's time of grief for her dead husband, she is married off to her brother-in-law, Onan. He is not any better than his dead brother. Onan proceeds to use poor Tamar to satisfy his needs, but he does not honor the intent of Levirate Marriage. He does not do what is necessary to produce an heir with Tamar. The text says he does this because he knows the heir will not be his, but rather would be considered Er's – his older brother's.

Poor Tamar was caught in competing societal priorities here – We have the practice of levirate marriage, but also at play here is the practice of inheritance customs. At this time, the vast majority of the patriarch's possessions would be passed down to the oldest son and his offspring. So, when Judah died the vast majority of everything would end up going to Onan's son who would have been considered Er's son.

I imagine this is what is driving Onan to act so selfishly and abuse Tamar in this way. Whatever the reason, the text tells us that God was not pleased and Onan exits stage left. Once again, Tamar is left in a precarious situation. What is going to happen to her now? The youngest brother was still quite young and had some growing up to do. What will her father-in-law do to ensure she is cared for? Judah does not want Tamar to marry his youngest – he has moved far past concern for the lineage of his son's and is now concerned about his continued line. Shelah is his LAST son and from his point of view, everyone who marries Tamar dies. He sends Tamar home to her people – to live with her family with all the societal expectations in place for her to live as a widow until Shelah is old enough. But that time never seems to come. He never seems to be old enough. Tamar is left alone and childless in her father's house while Judah's family continues to move forward.

Tragedy again strikes Judah's house when his wife dies. He honors the traditional time of mourning and then gets back to his old ways with Hirah – his wingman. Tamar apparently has friends in Judah's household because she has been keeping tabs on what has been happening; she hears about this development and decides that it is time to take matters into her own hands. Judah, Hirah and Shelah, the youngest son, set out on the road to bring Judah's sheep to the sheepshearers. On the way they come to Enaim, an easily overlooked dot on the map between slightly bigger places. A lot happens in between places – people feel more freedom when they might not be recognized.

What happens next says a lot about both Tamar and Judah. Tamar apparently knows the quality of Judah's character – knows that if he sees an opportunity with a particular kind of woman while on the road that he won't hesitate and she's 100% correct.

It is important to note that Tamar takes “off her widow’s garments” in order to make this plan happen. This detail is significant because while Judah and his family have been living their lives, Tamar has remained in mourning – she has been living in the shadow of the death of two bad husbands for years...

She has remained faithful to the promises and expectations of her father-in-law while he is living as if he has forgotten about her.

As she takes off that widow’s garment, she sets in motion a plan to right the wrongs that have been done to her by taking what is hers and exposing Judah’s injustice and faithlessness. On the other hand, Judah doesn’t even question the woman in the veil, He doesn’t try to see her face, NEVER once thinks about his daughter-in-law. Instead, he takes what he wants and hands over those items that are most dear to him – his signet, his staff, and the cord around his waist. Items that symbolize his very being, his household.

Three months later, when Judah hears rumors that Tamar is pregnant. He is furious that she has sinned against him and his family. He doesn’t reflect on the fact that he has not provided for her, and he certainly doesn’t give one thought about the incident on that roadside. Instead, he calls for her to be brought to him so he could burn her.

Having kept the secret for months as she felt those initial flutters of life within her, she finally comes forward with the truth and proof. Sister has the receipts! She tells Judah, these babies within me are children of the house of Judah... in fact, they are YOUR children for they belong to the owner of the very items Judah turned over. Judah’s anger and hypocrisy collide in that moment – he is being held accountable by the one person who has been faithful to him and to his family, by the one person who has acted honorably and justly. And through Tamar, God works transformation in Judah – helping him to recognize his selfish behavior and in so doing moves Judah and his descendants to reflect the redemptive love of God. It is through the offspring of Tamar and Judah that God moves in the world to bring forth good King David to rule over Israel. This abused and neglected woman is named as an ancestor of Jesus in the genealogy of Jesus in the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew.

Tamar, does not lose sight of what is good and just and takes action to make sure the wrongs are righted so that God’s goodness can be known in the world. Her descendants, King David and Jesus, act in the same way. They move righted the wrongs of the injustice present in the world and made known the glory of God. May we be so bold – to let go of our selfishness and recognize where we are needed to take action to bring about justice and equity in the world.

Amen.