

# J u d a h   a n d   T a m a r

By Merri Beth Stephens

Good morning. Welcome to the last of the two Sunday Service Sundays. Next week, church starts at 10:30. I'm glad you all decided to join us on this holiday weekend, while the rest of our congregation is out picknicking, hiking, swimming and boating. I'm sure you'll agree that coming here today was much more fun.

I'm going to tell you a scandalous story today. It's a story of desperation and cunning. It is an erotic and violent story. It's a story about breaking rules. And finally, it's a story about a hero. All throughout history, there have been stories of heroes. And as you all know, heroes are not always the most moral characters. Look at Homer's heroes. They often were not the most morally upright individuals. Look at King David. Quite a hero he was, but morally he had some issues. Well, today's hero is a woman who broke some rules. Some of you might say that she was not morally upright. Some of you might not even think what she did was heroic. But I'm not going to make that decision for you. That's for you to decide.

Today's story is straight from the Book of Genesis, Chapter 38. You may not have heard this one before. It's certainly not a story that I learned in Sunday School as a child. You might say that the adults charged with my early religious education just skimmed right past this tale. Greg and I have spent at least a few hours discussing this story this week and I know he disagrees with my particular spin on whether our protagonist was a heroine. He agrees with me that there are golden nuggets to be found in this tale, but he also cautions about the land mines that could take off a limb while we look for the gold nuggets. Have I piqued your interest yet? If so, relax for a few minutes and allow me to tell it to you.

You may remember Greg telling the story of Moses leading the

Children of Israel out of bondage into the land of Canaan. He talked about how the Israelites were wandering in the desert looking for a home, when they finally decided to go to Canaan. Well before this ever happened, before the Israelites were slaves of the Egyptians, another Israelite, Judah, wandered into Canaan all alone.

Judah hadn't really been getting along well with his father, Jacob, and was pretty sick of his gaggle of brothers who all competed for the old man's favor. So he was actually running a little bit when he settled in Canaan. He wasn't running from his father or from his brothers. Judah was running from his conscience.

You may remember that little story about Joseph and the coat of many colors. Judah and his brothers were the mean guys who sold their youngest brother Joseph into slavery and told their father, Jacob, that Joseph had been set upon and killed by some wild beast. I can just picture Judah waking up at night with the cold sweats, thinking about what he and his other brothers had done to Joseph, finally getting to the place where he just had to get out of town!

Upon arriving in Canaan, Judah met a local guy named Hirah. Hirah welcomed Judah into the community and sold him some land upon which to build a house. Hirah and Judah became great friends and eventually Hirah introduced Judah to the woman who was to become his wife, Bathshua. Judah and Bathshua did very well in Canaan. They had a lot of well tended land, a large flock of sheep, and generally were in good fortune. Many other Israelite friends of Judah, and others who didn't know him personally but heard how well he was doing, bought land from Hirah the Canaanite, built houses and were generally prosperous. Judah became a leader of his people in Canaan, keeper of the laws of Yahweh.

Judah's wife, Bathshua, worshipped Judah's god, Yahweh and took on all the rules of the Israelites. Why? Because that's what women did in that day and time. Judah and Bathshua had three sons - Er, Onan and

Shelah.

A little dramatic foreshortening is in order here. The kids are now grown and it's time for the oldest son, Er, to get married. All the Israelites told Judah that Er should marry one of their own. Hirah told Judah that he knew the perfect girl, a real beauty. Her name was Tamar and she was a Canaanite. So Judah brought Tamar to his eldest son, Er, as his new wife.

Tamar was indeed a beautiful woman. She was also a bold woman. She broke a lot of the rules for Israelite women. She often didn't wear her veil, and she spoke out loud in front of men. But Tamar did forego the religion of her people and embraced the religion of her husband. And as an Israelite wife, she was required to have a son in order to maintain her place in society. This was the plight of women in biblical times. A woman was defined by her ability to produce children, and a childless woman was seen as someone cursed by God. Over and over again in the Hebrew scriptures, we encounter women for whom childlessness was a matter of life and death. The matriarchs of the Israelites - Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel - are only the most prominent examples. "Give me children," cries Rachel to Jacob, "or else I die." (Gen. 30:1)

So Tamar knew going into this deal what her job was. Unfortunately, the Bible says at Genesis 38:7 that Er, Judah's first-born, was wicked in the sight of the Lord and the Lord slew him. We don't know what Er did, but clearly the Lord was not happy about it, and he ended up dead before Tamar could have a son.

Interestingly, the Levitical law of the time had a strange requirement and that was that the second born son of Judah was required to fulfill the duty to Tamar that Er was not able to fulfill. The second son, Onan, was not too happy about that. Any son that he sired by Tamar would be considered Er's son by law and would be given Judah's entire estate. If Tamar didn't have a son then Onan would inherit Judah's

estate. Don't think that Onan wasn't fully aware that he was going to screw himself out of his fortune, so to speak. So Onan visited Tamar, but did not fulfill his duty. I won't go into the details of what happened between them, but you can read it yourself in the book of Genesis. Suffice it to say that the Lord was pretty upset about it. Actually, the Lord was upset enough that he slew Onan too.

By this time, Tamar is getting a reputation as a woman that has bad luck with men. It seems that all the men that hang out with her end up being killed by God. People are definitely talking. Judah knew he was required to send his third son, Shelah to give Tamar a son, but Shelah wasn't really old enough yet -- or at least Judah used that excuse to buy some time. Judah instead sent Tamar back to her father and told her that she had to continue to live like a widow until Shelah was old enough to give her a son. So she was very much at Judah's mercy at this point. Her life was on hold until Judah sent his youngest son, Shelah, to her.

Enough time passed and Shelah didn't ever show up. Tamar waited and waited, her biological clock ticking louder and louder. Still Shelah never came to visit Tamar. She was getting a little desperate. If she didn't have a son she would have to live like a prisoner for the rest of her life. She would never have any kind of status in her community. Everything she had ever dreamed of would be completely gone. It appeared that Judah had decided to break with the law and not send his youngest son in to do his duty to the dead brother's widow.

Soon after Judah's wife, Bathshua died and Judah and his Canaanite buddy, Hirah, take off to a nearby town for the annual sheep shearing festival. Apparently, this was quite a celebration. Lots of drinking, carousing and general lascivious behavior went on during the annual sheep shearing festival. Tamar knew that Judah would be going to this, so she concocted a scheme. It's an interesting situation, actually. Tamar has a lawful right to a child from her husband's remaining brother. But she has absolutely no power whatsoever to obtain what is

rightfully owed to her. Judah has all the power even though the law favors Tamar's interests.

Tamar is in terrible peril here without a child. She could not inherit her husband's property, she could not rely on the inheritance of her children, and she could not comfortably return to the house of her father, except perhaps as a lonely spinster to be shut away and ignored. The childless and widowed Tamar is a misfit who simply does not belong anywhere. And this is unacceptable to her. According to the law of that time, a man's estate passed directly to his children (Deut. 21:16-17) or his other blood relations. (Num. 27:8-11).

Knowing all she had at risk, Tamar decided to dress as a woman of ill repute (more specifically a harlot) and position herself by the road where she knew Judah would walk by on his way to the sheep-shearing festival. She disguised herself with a veil so Judah wouldn't recognize her. And she determined she'd get her son one way or another. She broke all the moral rules of her day. Was it worth it? Well, her plan worked. Judah was fooled by her disguise and the two of them had an encounter.

Unfortunately, Judah had nothing to pay this supposed woman of ill repute, however, because Hirah had his money. So he promised her that a sheep from his flock would be delivered to her. She made him give her his staff and seal as a promise that the sheep would be delivered.

Judah and Hirah got back to their homes after the festival and Judah sent Hirah back to the mystery woman with a prize sheep to pay her for her services. Hirah can't find her, however. Of course, we know that's because Tamar was back at home, dressed as a widow. Hirah comes back to Judah and tells him that he can't find the woman. It is all but forgotten.

Skip ahead a few months. Tamar is back in her village and people start

talking about how she's putting on weight. Soon after that they start to think maybe it's not weight, maybe this widow in the clothing of mourning is actually pregnant. Soon it becomes very apparent that she is indeed pregnant.

Judah hears about this. Israelite elders hear about it as well. The law demands that Tamar be burned alive, and Judah must be the one that burns her. He doesn't want to, you understand, but he has to. It's the law. So he has some fellows go get her. They bring her to Judah, with all her relatives crying and begging Judah not to kill Tamar. Judah really doesn't want to do this. But he has no choice. Just as he's about to decree that she must be burned alive, she brings out his staff and seal and declares that the father of her baby is the owner of the staff and seal.

It's suddenly very quiet in the room. All eyes turn to Judah as he announces, "No one will burn today. Tamar is right, and I am wrong - I should have sent Shelah to her. The seal and the staff are mine, and so is the child."

Okay, what happened here? Tamar was able to teach Judah and Judah was able to learn the lesson. Certainly, it can be argued that Tamar was a flawed individual. So was Judah. And here in this moment when the truth comes out, Judah owns up to his error. And he did this in front of a room full of people. How simultaneously humiliating and liberating that must have been for Judah. How frightened Tamar must have been.

Was Tamar's sexual ambush of Judah the act of a courageous and resourceful woman who refused to accept passively the fate that the patriarchy of ancient Israel decreed for a childless widow? Or was she a woman who was desperately trying anything to get what she wanted? Well, I would contend that Tamar was a woman who was brave enough to assert herself in the only way she could. Tamar had already become an outcast among her own people, because she married an Israelite.

And she had no status whatsoever among the people she had married into. She had no legal recourse at her disposal.

This is the part where I say that they all lived happily ever after. The scriptures are clear that Judah never slept with Tamar again, although he did raise the twin sons that Tamar delivered as his own.

The lucky twin that was born first was Perez, and if you turn forward in the Christian scriptures to Matthew, Chapter 1, you'll note that the Jesus was a direct descendent of Perez, and of Tamar and Judah.

This interesting story gets even more interesting when you realize the tie between Tamar, Judah and Jesus, in my opinion. It seems that Jesus comes from a long line of rule breakers. Maybe that's where he got his rebellious spirit. Remember, Jesus was always breaking rules. He broke the sabbath, he talked to harlots, and on and on. I bet if you went back to Jesus's time and asked one of the Pharisees or Saducees whether Jesus was moral, they would agree that he was highly immoral. But two thousand years later we look back and realize that he was writing a new moral code. He was a hero.

Yes, out of this story comes a line of descendents that eventually give rise to the Christian Messiah, Jesus Christ. Jesus was the man who said I came not to destroy the law but to fulfill it. The man who said, I was a stranger and you took me in. The man who said, love your neighbor as yourself. This great teacher and prophet who brought us a concept of forgiveness and love that was new to that part of the world, and still resonates strongly with millions and millions of people today. I guess people were pretty much the same back then as they are now - - sometimes flawed, sometimes brave, sometimes weak, sometimes strong, sometimes frightened, sometimes fearless, etc.

The story of Tamar allows us to glimpse the deadly peril that confronted

women of the biblical era who did not submit to the mastery of a male, whether father or husband. Above all, Tamar is a woman whose will is so strong, whose passion burns so bright, that she writes herself into history by breaking the moral code of her time. She didn't succeed by righteous living. As a matter of fact, when she revealed to Judah that he was the father of her child, she was giving all the evidence she needed to give to damn herself to death by burning. Why did her plan work? Because she had the courage to call Judah to task.

Sometimes our very survival depends on our ability to look beyond the conventional morality and see the big picture. The story I just told you is full of people who chose not to follow the moral rules of the day. Judah chose to bring a Canaanite woman to his son for marriage. Tamar chose to become a harlot in order to have a son when there was no other way, and Judah chose not to follow the law by burning Tamar alive. These are some flawed people. But they're also people whose lessons in bravery and heroism continue to teach us lessons today. The story of Tamar may trouble us a little, because we're uncomfortable with a heroine whose weapon of choice is her own sexuality. It's a scandalous tale. It is blatantly sexist and it rankles our feminist sensibilities.

But we can't help but secretly cheer for Tamar, and be proud of her just a little bit. The willful and indomitable Tamar is no less than the savior who ensures the survival of the Jewish people. The very word "Jew" is specifically and directly derived from "Judah" and, among the Twelve Tribes of Israel, it is the tribe of Judah that survived, and through the House of David, supplied the Israelites with its greatest kings. But the tribe was facing early extinction precisely because none of Judah's sons were able to help Tamar have a son. The Jewish people would have perished then and there if not for Tamar's courage and determination, although I doubt that she was aware of the long-lasting results of her acts.

People everywhere are flawed, just like both Tamar and Judah were

flawed. We're all tossed around in our current culture, trying to make sense of it all. I'm sure that everyone in this room can come up with a story about someone who has broken the law or at least broken a moral code in an effort to right a wrong. Does the end justify the means? I think there are times when we can agree with the ends, but find the means distasteful. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights activists broke all the Jim Crow Laws of their days. The abolitionists broke laws protecting slave owners. Now I'm not saying that Tamar did what she did to further the cause of women's rights or that she really even saw her acts as being righteous. But you can't argue that she wasn't courageous and brave. Had she followed the rules she would have gotten nowhere, just like following the rules of segregation would have gotten black Americans nowhere. Sometimes you have to fight for what is rightfully yours. Sometimes laws must be broken on behalf of justice.

Judah was another flawed individual, who ended up acting courageously. When he decreed that Tamar would not die, he was breaking the law. But he did it anyway. And a great race of people arose from these two flawed individuals. In fact, one of the most influential people of our time arose from this very union.

Sometimes only time will tell what's right and what's wrong. Like Judah and Tamar, we try very hard to go through our lives without having to face these types of dilemmas when we have to take great personal risk to do what we think is the right thing. Saul Alinsky says that "The real question has always been, 'Does this particular end justify this particular means?'" We try not to hurt others, and find our way through the maze without breaking too many of the rules that our parents taught us. Really, we're not that different from the people 3000 years ago. The rules have changed, but there are still rules. Tamar stepped out of the mores of her time and made history. Jesus did the same thing. And all the women that Jim mentioned during the call to worship are examples of the same behavior.