

1620

“The Cry of Tamar, A Desolate Woman”

November 18, 2017

Presbytery

2 Samuel 13:1-22

Shortly before the events described in this 13th chapter of 2 Samuel, the prophet Nathan confronted David about his sin with Bathsheba. David, for his part, owned his misdeeds, and Nathan extended God’s forgiveness. But forgiveness and accountability are not the same. David was indeed forgiven and even went on to be known as a man after God’s own heart. But Bathsheba’s spouse was still dead, as would be the child to be born of David’s infidelity.

Nathan added one more thing that must’ve sent a shudder down David’s spine. He put it this way:

Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house. (2 Samuel 12:10, NRSV)

David would feel that sword in ways he couldn’t possibly have imagined at the time, and it began with a case of sexual assault.

The rape of his own daughter Tamar at the hands of his own son, his firstborn Amnon.

You probably know the story, but I wonder if you’ve followed it through to the extent of its consequences.

First came this advice from her brother Absalom, immediately after the crime:

Be quiet for now, my sister; He is your brother; do not take this to heart. (2 Samuel 13:20)

What do you suppose comments like that do to a person? Don’t take this to heart. Maybe you know all too well. All we know about Tamar’s future is this, from the same verse:

Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom’s house.

She used to live with her father the king, but she's disgraced now. She, the victim, is disgraced, and in turn, displaced.

David is furious when he hears of this but apparently doesn't do anything about it. Two years go by. Two years. Does anyone even talk about it during this time, or does it just build up like a tea kettle on the stove with the little hole plugged up? We find out when Absalom, the same man who told Tamar to 'not take this to heart,' engineers a plot that leads to Amnon's death. Revenge may be sweet, but it leaves a bitter aftertaste. Tamar is still a desolate woman, and Absalom runs off to his grandfather's place and hides out for three years.

We're now five years out from the rape of Tamar, a desolate woman.

Absalom is allowed to return home but David refuses to see him, and we have a stalemate for two more years. Don't take this to heart, Tamar. We're not going to talk about it. And Tamar remains a desperate woman.

Absalom commits an act of ecological warfare to get his father's attention, and they reunite briefly, but nothing comes of it, and the deadly silence that led to Amnon's death is set to build all over again.

Now four years go by and we have a full scale rebellion that results in David's fleeing for his life, countless other lives lost and the death of Absalom himself.

An unspeakable crime. Two years after that, a murder. Then three years of exile. After returning home, two years of an uneasy truce at best. Then after four more years we have ignition that puts the entire country in jeopardy. Eleven years, friends. And through it all Tamar is a desolate woman.

We don't know this, but I can imagine that every step, including the murder of the rapist himself, only deepened Tamar's trauma and her feelings of abandonment and isolation.

We don't hear from Tamar after the rape itself. Actually we never hear from her again. All we know is that she came under the care of Absalom rather than David. Even though she was an innocent victim, the culture of the day affirmed Tamar's disgrace, and she probably never married. There are ancient texts that equate an unmarried woman with an unplowed field.

Absalom seems to have his mind more focused on keeping the whole thing hushed up and finding a way to get back at Amnon for his crime. David, though he is king, has lost his moral authority in his own family, and comes across as a mere pawn in the family's downward spiral.

There's a vast and unspoken conspiracy of silence in all this, don't you see?

You see, it's the whole system, friends. It's all part of a larger puzzle born of human sin and depravity, and God keep the church of Jesus Christ from being part of the problem instead of a safe place where victims can find hope and healing, victimizers learn the power of repentance and redirection, and society itself can be built on firmer footing.

Any Tamars out there? How're you feeling? How about Amnon, any Amnons out there? There are better ways of dealing with your feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness. Absalom, how about you? Instead of letting it control you to where the tragedy grows, is there something else you can do with the rage that won't let you go?

Before his death, Absalom had four children, three boys and one girl. He named his daughter Tamar.

And in that, maybe we find the slightest hint of resurrection. Remember, friends, the very first thing the risen Christ showed his awestruck disciples was his scars. No cover up. No pretense. Just scars. Maybe we can start to rebuild with honest courage like that.

Healing is painful. That's why too many people never experience it. So how about it, church? Is there hope? Is there a balm in Gilead?