

The Voice of Tamar
May 17, 2018
Casa de Manana
Rev. Bev Franco

Our text for this evening reminds us that we should live as children of the light. Not only does that mean to live in obedience to the words and actions of Christ, but it also means that we have a responsibility to expose sin and suffering to the light of day and to the attention of others.

Sin thrives in secret and darkness, it grows like mildew when it is hidden from the sun. When bad things happen, the worse thing we can do is hide them away. Not only do we allow perpetrators to get away with acts of destruction and harm, not only do we create and allow other victims, but we shame those who are victimized. The time to speak up is now.

Listen now, for the Word of the Lord as it comes to us from the First Letter of Peter.

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. ⁷ Therefore do not be associated with them. ⁸ For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— ⁹ for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. ¹⁰ Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.

¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; ¹³ but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴ for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”

This is the Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.* Let us pray.

(Pull a headcovering around my head and bow my head. Then look up.)

My name is Tamar.

My story is in the Bible, in the Holy Scripture of my people, the Israelites, but you may never have heard it. I think my story is not often told, because it is one of shame, and violence, and the sinfulness of men.

I am a royal princess. You may not know it now, now that I am old, but I was once young and beautiful and so, so innocent. But all of that was stripped away from me.

My brothers and sisters and I grew up in the palace of our father, the mighty warrior king David. Some of my siblings, like my brother Absalom, share a mother with me, but others, like my brother Amnon, are children of the other wives of our father.

I was raised by the women of the palace, and I was taught early of my value to my father. Because I was beautiful and a virgin, my father could make important alliances by marrying me to an ally or to an enemy. My virginity was a great prize and it was guarded carefully. No

strange men were allowed near me. I did not know then what I do now – danger most often lies closer to home.

Because I was a princess and a virgin, my father gave me a beautiful coat to wear. It was a sign of my status as a princess and virgin. I was not to be touched.

When I was 14, I became a woman. I was so proud to join the ranks of my mothers and aunts! I dreamed of the husband my father would find for me and the sons I would bear for him. Perhaps I might even be the chief wife and rule over his palace or household.

But while I was dreaming of weddings and babies, my brother Amnon had darker dreams. I did not know it, but he had become sick with longing for me. He could think of nothing else but possessing me, but he knew that it would be forbidden to take me, not only because I was a virgin, but also because I was his sister, and this was forbidden in the Torah. But he thought of nothing but me, night and day.

I wonder what might have happened sometimes, if Amnon had confessed his longings to a righteous man, an older man, perhaps, who would have given him wise counsel. An older man might have convinced Amnon that his thoughts were sinful. He might have guided Amnon into thinking of others things, or encouraged him to seek a wife.

But this was not to be. Amnon instead confided in our cousin Jonadab, the son of our father's brother. Jonadab was just as spoiled and impetuous as Amnon. Instead of being horrified by Amnon's obsession, he seemed delighted by it. It was almost as if Jonadab gave my brother's dark desire permission.

Now that I am wiser, I have learned that men do not often do dark and cruel and wicked things on their own. It is when they live in a culture of violence against women, when ugly words are spoken freely, when women are seen as objects that can be bought and sold, that they begin to think they are entitled to take and take and take, whatever the consequences.

And I sometimes think that Jonadab, the man who encouraged my brother, was not my cousin at all, but the Dark One in human form, the Satan come to tempt men to be their worst selves. But perhaps he too, like Amnon, was just a spoiled youth who had only ever been given just what he wanted.

Jonadab told Amnon what to do, and Amnon followed his lead. He feigned illness, and when our father David came to see him, Amnon said the only thing that would soothe him would be a visit from his beloved sister Tamar. He wanted me to make him a meal and feed it to him by my own hand. My father was pleased, and sent me to my brother Amnon's house.

I too was pleased, proud to be useful and wanted by this brother who often ignored or derided me. I dressed in the coat my father had given me, and went to prepare cakes for Amnon.

When I arrived, Amnon sent his servants away. And after I had cooked the cakes, he asked that I serve him in his bedchamber as he reclined on his sleeping couch. But when I had done so, he suddenly grabbed me and pulled me on top of him. "Come, lie with me, my sister," he panted into my ear.

That is when I knew what was happening. I tried to run, but my brother's illness was only feigned, and he was too strong. I tried to reason with him.

"No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile!" But he only tore my royal coat and pinned me down.

I tried to reason again, to get him to think of the consequences of what he was doing. I asked, "As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel." But he had become like an animal, beyond reason.

Then I tried promising to marry him, for I knew our father would give him anything he wanted, "I beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you."

But he would not listen to me; and being stronger than me, he forced me and raped me.

When it was over, I thought for a moment of the future. No other man would have me now for my virginity was gone. I was a disgrace, an outcast. My only hope would be that he would convince our father that we should be married.

But Amnon's desire for me had been satiated. Instead, he was seized with a very great loathing for me. Indeed, his loathing was even greater than the lust he had felt. I know now, as a wiser woman, that this loathing was not for me, but for himself, for the shame and the guilt and the fear he felt. But he could not bear those feelings, they were too hot to contain and too shameful to even consider, so he took his loathing out on me.

All he said was, "Get out!"

I pleaded with him, "No, my brother; for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me."

But he would not listen to me. He called the young man who served him and said, "Put this woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her." The servant pushed me out the door and I heard the scraping of the lock. It sounded like the bell of doom.

I stood up slowly. My beautiful garment was stained with blood and dirt and his essence. I shredded the coat and covered my head with ashes to signify my grief and despair. I walked away, weeping like I had never wept before.

I found myself at the home of my brother Absalom. He tried to comfort me, taking me in his arms and letting me weep. He must have known what had happened, for he said, "Has Amnon your brother been with you? *Be quiet for now*, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart."

"Be quiet. Be quiet. Be quiet!" His words told me clearly that what had happened was *my* shame to bear.

And so I remained, a desolate woman, in my brother Absalom's house. I waited there for my father to revenge me. I waited for Amnon to confess and clear my name. I waited for our marriage. But none of those things came to pass.

Oh, my father King David became very angry when he heard, but he would not punish Amnon. It was because he loved him, he said, for Amnon was his firstborn. But I think perhaps it was because my father believed Amnon's lies, for Amnon was a man and I am only a woman.

Absalom did not speak up on my behalf, but he did keep me to live with him, and I am grateful, for I am no longer worthy to be married. He did not speak at all to Amnon, neither good nor bad, for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had raped me.

It was not until two years later, that my brother took revenge. He lured Amnon and all of my brothers to a great feast, and then, when Amnon was merry with wine, Absalom's servant rose up and killed him with a sword. Ironically, it was our cousin Jonadab who carried the news to our father and comforted him.

Absalom never truly forgave our father for not punishing Amnon. He rebelled against King David, at one point even holding the palace and sleeping with all my father's concubines, a clear sign of usurping his father's place.

But one day, after a losing a battle to the king, Absalom was riding on his mule as it went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on.

One of my father's soldiers told his general, Joab, and Joab took three spears in his hand, and thrust them into the heart of Absalom, while he was still alive in the oak. And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him.

My father mourned the loss of his son, for Absalom had been strong and beautiful and beloved by the people. On hearing of his death, the king wept, and cried, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you!"

I shall weep and mourn for both of my brothers: for the happy children they both were and for the great and benevolent kings they might have become. And I shall weep for the life I will never have, for the husband I will never love, for the children I will never bear, because of the violence Amnon showed me.

(Remove the headcovering.)

Edmund Burke said, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." There will always be evil in this world, evil people with dark fantasies. There will be teacher who violate their students. There will be film producers who demand sex for movie roles. There will be powerful and rich men who believe they can grab women by their genitals without any consequences. They are surrounded by *legions* of Jonadabs, men who will cheer them on; men who will tell them they are above the law, that they deserve to get all they can grab by force, that it is the fault of their victims for tempting them.

They thrive in secret and darkness, and Peter tells us not to associate with them. We are children of light, whose deeds can be exposed to the sun. Jesus said, "For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

We must stop telling victims, “Be quiet.” So many women have come forth recently to tell their stories of harassment and molestation and rape, and they are incredibly brave. As painful as it can be, we must listen to those stories, affirm their pain, and help them heal. Only in the light can the deeds of the perpetrators be seen.

“Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; ¹³ but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴ for everything that becomes visible is light.

Amen.