

Where Could I Carry My Shame?

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2 Samuel 13:1-22

John 20:24-29

From the beginning, it was never her story. Her story was stolen from her. Tamar is located in reference to the males in her life. Tamar, the sister of Absalom. Tamar, kin of David. Never just Tamar. The narrator then immediately begins to illicit sympathy for Amnon, the rapist. Amnon, poor lovesick, Amnon. So tormented by his love for his half-sister he has made himself ill. Never mind that from the beginning, he sees her as an object. The NRSV says “it seemed impossible for him to do anything to her.” In the Hebrew, ever more crudely, it reads simply “it seemed impossible for him to do her.”

At Amnon’s request, David sends Tamar to prepare food for him, and she goes. What choice did she have? Perhaps she didn’t know what was coming. Perhaps she was kindhearted and enjoyed taking care of other people, especially when they were family. We don’t know what she was thinking. Remember, Tamar does not get to tell the story. But when Amnon insists “come lie with me,” finally we hear Tamar’s voice, “No! Do not force me! Do not do anything so vile!” Now Tamar knows the culture she lives in. If Amnon wants her, he will have her. There is really no avoiding this. But she begs him, at least to follow the customs of Israel. Women were treated as property to be given away, but Tamar asks at least that he take her properly. “Ask David,” she says. “He’ll give me to you.” Now we must be careful not to take this as some sort of proof that Tamar really wanted Amnon. She was aware of the realities of her time. Tamar evokes ancient laws. Exodus 22:16: “When a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged to be married, and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife.” Deuteronomy 22: 28: “If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are caught in the act, the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman’s father, and she shall become his wife.” Tamar knows she will be seen as damaged goods. She will have no future. But Amnon will not listen to her. The NRSV reads, “he forced her and lay with her.” The Hebrew text, again ever so crudely reads, “he forced her and lay her.”

Tamar’s story, sadly, is still modern. Friends of mine told me I was irresponsible to preach on this text. “What if there are people in your congregation who have been raped or abused? What will you say to them?” they asked. The first thing I need to say is that the question is not “what if.” Statistically speaking there can be no “what if” about it. There are almost certainly people in this congregation for whom this passage brings up their most painful memories...and the most important message I wish I could say to them is that the church has a place for their story. But I don’t want know if I can say that yet because the church has not proved itself to be a safe space, but I think making it one starts with breaking the silence. Probably anyone who has ever grieved about anything knows the aggravating loneliness that comes when people respond with either trite clichés or fail to even acknowledge what you’re going through. They are so uncomfortable with your pain that they seek to make the situation easier for them. After a while all you want is someone just to say, “That’s horrible. I’m so sorry that happened.”

Every 2 minutes someone in the United States is sexually assaulted. Although it is largely portrayed as a crime against females, it is estimated that 1 in 71 men have been raped, and some estimates run even higher. Approximately 2/3 of assaults are committed by someone the victim

knows. Statistics show that in more cases than not rape is premeditated, challenging the common notion that rape is a crime of passion that happens when one gets caught up in the moment. Rape is not a crime of passion or sexual desire. It happens to infants, elderly people, and disproportionately to people with physical or mental disabilities. It is a crime of power. A failure to notice another's humanity. Although rape is a particularly horrible kind of objectification, we need to recognize that it stems from the same tendency we are probably all guilty of in some way or another...of seeing another human being as a means to an end. Of imagining that another's well-being is unconnected to our own. This is exactly what we do if we imagine that rape or abuse is a problem that happens in another person's home, on the other side of town, in another part of the world. First, we must recognize that it is closer to home than most of us dare to acknowledge. Secondly, no matter where it is, we must give up the illusion that it is not our problem.

Tamar's pain is compounded by the conspiracy of silence that marks the responses of the males in the story. Tamar is not even present in the second half of the story, as her brother Absalom seeks revenge, seemingly not out of a concern for his sister's feelings but to avenge his property. "Do not take this to heart," Absalom tells Tamar. King David after hearing these things, becomes angry, and then ultimately does nothing. He can't. Because he loves Amnon *too* much. He looks right past what happened. Never mind that David just learned his own lesson about Bathsheba only a few chapters earlier. Everyone is angry, but ultimately Tamar is left to live out her days, a desolate woman.

When pleading with Amnon, Tamar asks, "Where could I carry my shame if you rape me?" This is a question survivors of rape and other forms of violence ask still today. "Where can I bring my shame?" And the church remains largely silent, perhaps implicitly saying, "Not here."

And what are we supposed to say? What are we supposed to do? If it's in the Bible, it must be okay, right? That has been the logic behind hurtful messages the church has given for centuries. Turn the other cheek. Forgive your oppressor. Bear your cross. Women are temptresses, ever since Eve. It must have been your fault. And the list goes on and on. David is our great hero. David remains silent because he loves Amnon too much. And so often we remain silent because we love David and our Bible and our church too much to be honest with ourselves. So we offer cheap comfort or no comfort at all. Ruth Schmidt, an author and rape survivor, wrote the following about her experience with cheap comfort from the church:

I am an uncomfortable person. To know me is to know that we live in a society where rape is permitted...to know an uncomfortable feeling of "all is not right" in this life. To know me is to know an anger which is ice blue, to know that women are vulnerable as a sex, to know that hatred is not simply a concept of philosophy, but a painful reality. Women are raped out of hatred. Women hate out of the reality of rape. To know me certainly is not to love me. And to love me is to risk incredible frustration and painful rejection. For I live first and foremost as a survivor of rape, as a spokesperson of inequality, as an angry, angry woman.

Listen to my anger. I have been taken in darkness.

"All that had come to be had life in Him and that life was the light of men, a light that shines in the darkness, a light that darkness could not overpower." I do not know that light. "Sin began with a woman and thanks to her we all must die." I do not know that sin.

Understand my anger, for you have brought it upon me. "Happy are those who are persecuted in the cause of right; theirs is the kingdom of heaven." I do not know this heaven.¹

Feminist scholar Nancy Bowen says that some women and men may decide that the Bible will never be a safe space for them. Stories, including Bible stories, take us to new worlds, but we must be careful about the worlds we allow ourselves to be taken to. The story of Tamar asks us to go to a world where women are not safe or valued, where violence is answered with more violence, and victims are left desolate. Unfortunately, this bears significant resemblance to our own world. How do we make the Bible and our own world safer for those who have experienced violence? Renita Weems says that reading the Bible does not have to mean "simply surrendering oneself totally to the literary strategies and imaginative worlds of narrators."² To resist going to this world is not to abandon the worth of the Bible. It is to acknowledge the richness and diversity present in the Bible and in our experiences of God. We must measure each individual story against the whole of scripture. This story should be held together with the themes found throughout scripture of justice for the vulnerable and abundant life for all.

Tamar spread ashes on her head and tore her clothes. It brings us back to Ash Wednesday. Here. On the other side of Easter. Where things like rape just don't seem to fit. What does any of this have to do with resurrection?

Rape survivor Ruth Schmidt writes:

"It is difficult for many to imagine how one's life changes after living through an experience of terror. I cannot imagine how my life might have been had I not been raped. I have little connection to my life prior to the rape. Rape forced me to start over. In a very disturbing way I experienced the trauma of being torn from the womb and immediately recognizing that even while clothed I am naked, even in a family I am alone, even speaking I am silenced and even living I am dying."³

This is rebirth, but it is like being born again in a world far crueler than she'd ever imagined. It is a far cry from the new life we think about coming through the resurrected Jesus.

But the thing is, Jesus is resurrected with all his scars still visible. Jesus shows the disciples his wounds. And interestingly, Thomas has no doubt that Jesus, if he is indeed resurrected, will still bear the scars from his crucifixion. The crucifixion was *real*. Jesus lets Thomas put his finger in the marks of the nails and his hand in his side. Thomas needs to see and feel his woundedness.

We tend to focus on Thomas the Doubter. The passage tells us his nickname was the Twin, but I don't think he gets called that much anymore. He has a new name: Doubting Thomas. Thomas had good reason to doubt. Jesus was not exactly the savior anyone expected. Dying the shameful death of a criminal on a cross was not what anyone thought he had come to do. Jesus knows the importance of remembrance and of witness. For this reason, he calls his disciples and continues to call us today to remembrance at the communion table. He appears to the disciples so that they can be witnesses. Jesus' ministry on earth is over, but the ministry of the disciples is only beginning. John tells us he records the signs Jesus does "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may

¹ Qtd in Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), 97.

² Renita Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 92.

³ Qtd in Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, 81.

have life in his name.” By reading the signs, we come to believe, and through believing to have life, and through the power of life to witness to resurrection, even in the midst of a wounded world.

During Easter, we can get so bombarded with images of spring, blooming flowers, and baby animals that we can forget that the resurrection we confess as Christians is more than that. It is not part of the natural cycle of things. It is *unnatural*. The dead should stay dead. But instead in a powerful act of resistance against violence and death, Jesus rises. In her book Redeeming Memories, Flora Keshgegian argues that “Our witness to the resurrection ought to include not only the story of Jesus Christ, but the stories of all who claimed power, even when they did not know that was what they were doing, who found ways to go on living, even when there seemed to be no way.”⁴ The lives and stories of survivors of violence are part of the story of resurrection. Not in a romanticized way. There are still wounds. There is still anger. Keshgegian says that “no future hope or restoration negates the reality of past injury. There is hope nonetheless.”⁵ Where there is hope, there is God.

Where was God for Tamar? God works through God’s people. Perhaps God was depending on the anointed one, David, to speak up. It seems that God, like Tamar, was left out of the story. But if we seek to re-claim the voices silenced, there I think we will find God’s voice. Tamar is not lost with God. With God, she can finally lay down her shame. Where is God for so many suffering today? God is calling us. Jesus is resurrected, and we must get to work.

Tamar’s no was not heard. And so many no’s go unheard today. But they must be heard. We must join in saying no to violence and not stop until we are heard. Christ is risen indeed, and we must rise.

⁴ Flora Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 180.

⁵ Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories*, 175.