

**Advent Adventures 2022: Nov 27: Tamar -- Genesis 38
Justice and Peace – past the roaring and into blessing
Bonni-Belle Pickard**

Preservice music:

Heaven Shall Not Wait – StF 701

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHMt3YJHbZE&list=PLfJKMN-CtuWCeWWWKYxMLY_81soj1dufJ&index=30

Longing for light (Christ be our light)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ITDS5B218g&list=PLfJKMN-CtuWCeWWWKYxMLY_81soj1dufJ&index=33

Into the darkness – StF 173

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXKOxub5obc&t=45s>

Praise to the God who clears the way – StF 183

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yj-Cj8afpFM&t=68s>

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Call to worship and intro

El-Shaddai

Intro to Monologue –

Tamar Monologue –

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel – StF 180

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRDjVh2uCMw>

Reflection –

Intercessions/Lord's Prayer

Hymn – Pray for a world – StF 526 –

Benediction

Our churches recognise a three-year plan of 'lectionary' readings to take us through the whole of the Bible.

Each year focusses on a different gospel story: Matthew, Mark, Luke as well as readings from the Old Testament, Psalms, and the rest of the New Testament (with the gospel of John being interspersed throughout).

The Christian year – and its focus on a different Gospel -- begins with Advent: this year's gospel is Matthew's.

It is tempting to jump over the first chapter of Matthew: in the Authorised Version, it consisted of a long line of 'begats' – laying out a genealogy of Jesus beginning with Abraham and ending with Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus.

The genealogy is laid out in three sections: from Abraham to David; from David through the Babylonian exile; and lastly the fathers leading up to Jesus' birth. There are approximately fourteen fathers in each section, which corresponds to the numerical value of David's name



There are other somewhat different accounts of who-fathered-whom in the Bible can see Matthew's version shows he felt it very important to emphasise that Jesus was both a 'son' of Abraham and a 'son' of David!

(though many have argued that Joseph's biological lineage was not the most important part of Jesus' virgin-birth blood line!)

Some scholars have reflected that Matthew's gospel was written at a time

When Christianity was regarded as rather scandalous,

Particularly because it upheld the dignity of women as well as men –

So Matthew was eager to show Jesus' birth in a 'proper' light...

Noting the inclusion of four *women* in Matthew's genealogy, four women who were each Gentiles (i.e., not Jews) and/or women "who, like Mary, had irregular sexual unions but were considered important for God's plan." (NRSV).

Biblical 'back story' for each of these four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bath-sheba.

Dramatic monologues for each other them –

trying to imagine what their lives were like, how they regarded the Hebrew God –

whom they probably knew as El-Shaddai –

and how their legacy might have influenced Jesus and his ministry.

Their stories give me an opportunity to explore again a pre-Christian understanding of inviting and welcoming God into our lives – something we as Christians strive to do during Advent.

Over the next four weeks, I will be presenting each woman in turn with a monologue.

I invite you to think with me about how their story resonates with today's world –

and how it might have influenced Jesus and his ministry.

Though in the monologues themselves, I do not mention Jesus by name,

I hope that exploring their stories will help us all better understand

their hopes and dreams and aspirations, which we see fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

El-Shaddai

there were many names for God in the Hebrew Bible,
and strict Jews did not dare utter the name of God.

Instead, they wrote the symbols we pronounce Yahweh (or Jehovah)
and they spoke of Adonai, which meant 'the Lord'.

One of the other frequently used names was 'El-Shaddai',
which is often translated as 'God Almighty'
but also can be translated as 'the breasted One' –
perhaps referring to the god of the mountains or an ancient fertility god.

Understanding of who-God-was was still developing,
but El-Shaddai was an important part of that development.

El-Shaddai might have particularly resonated with women
who could recognise in that description of God
a reflection that their own bodies were indeed made 'in the image of God',
even if the patriarchy of the time denied the holiness of their female embodiment.

El-Shaddai, El-Shaddai, El-Elyon na Adonai
Age to age You're still the same
By the power of the name
El-Shaddai, El-Shaddai, Erkahmka na Adonai
We will praise and lift You high, El-Shaddai

Through Your love and through the ram
You saved the son of Abraham
Through the power of Your hand
Turned the sea into dry land

To the outcast on her knees
You were the God who really sees
And by Your might
You set Your children free

El-Shaddai, El-Shaddai, El-Elyon na Adonai
Age to age You're still the same
By the power of the name
El-Shaddai, El-Shaddai, Erkahmka na Adonai
We will praise and lift You high, El-Shaddai

The 'back story' for our first woman listed in Matthew's genealogy, **Tamar**,
Comes from chapter 38 of Genesis.

It follows after the story of Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery
And telling their father that he had been killed by a wild animal.

It is a story about Joseph's older brother Judah,
Who is also involved in our story today.

Much of the rest of Genesis is about Joseph himself,
Though his brothers, including Judah, are mentioned.
Tamar herself isn't mentioned again,
So what we have to go on is the story outlined in Chapter 38...

TAMAR MONOLOGUE

Oh! hello!
Not often that I have visitors!
Have you come to see the twins?
They're sleeping now. Shhh!
They were such restless babies
And now that they're toddlers,
They just wear themselves out!
Me, too – but after all the years of waiting
It feels good to be tired out!

Here, sit awhile --
You bless me by your presence
As God has blessed me with the presence of the twins.
They are a special gift, you know.
A promise fulfilled by El-Shaddai,
Th God that hears the cry of the outcast
And acts on our behalf!

Surely you're heard a bit of my story – everyone has!
Otherwise, why would you come?
I'm glad you've come to hear it from me,
What do the others know of what is and was in my heart?

And surely you're head of Judah, too,
Mighty Judah!
'Roaring like a lion', that's Judah!
You've heard the echoes of his roar, no doubt,
Wherever you've come from.

But roaring doesn't mean right
And Judah's stories of his God,
El-Shaddai, who brought Judah's people
From nothingness to multitudes
From barrenness to blessing,
The stories he told hinted
That El-Shaddai didn't need to roar
To be heard
To be just
To be holy.

The El-Shaddai God that we Canaanites heard about –
The God who heard the pleas of Sarah and of Hagar
And Rachel and Leah
And Rebekah
The God who blessed them:
That God was bigger than the roaring of Judah.

So we let Judah roar and demand his 'due'

And we looked beyond –
Beyond the rumors
That Judah had sold his own brother into slavery
That he had come to find a Canaanite wife
Because no Hebrew woman would have him...

Anyway, our Canaanite Shua became his wife.
Bore him three sons – what more could he want?
And, following the examples of Shua's father,
My father decided to have me become Judah's daughter-in-law.
I don't know about the others,
But El-Shaddai seemed a better bet than our god, Baal.
So I balanced the roaring of the lion
With the blessing of his God
And I became Judah's first daughter-in law, Er's wife.

But from sour grape vines come sour grapes
And Er had evidently learned well his father's roar.
Too well
The man was... evil!
So evil that I cried out to El-Shaddai:
"Save me! Even if it means I am to be a widow,
Save me from his man!"

And the Lord heard my cry and answered me,
And when Er was struck down dead
I shivered in the presence of the Holy One of Israel.

Judah looked on me with some suspicion:
Had this Canaanite woman cursed his son?

But he knew his duty, and he did it:
Judah sent Onan in to me,
Onan, his second son,
Whose duty it was to fulfill his brother's line.

But Onan had also learned the evil ways
Of looking out only for his own:
He poured his seed onto the barren ground
Instead of into my fertility.
No regard either for his brother's line
Or his brother's wife.

And the Lord struck him dead, too,
Before I could even dare think to pray for deliverance!
And so Judah's second son was no more
And Judah's grief
Tore his roar
Into silence
Stony silence.

A wall of narrow-eyed fear and distrust
Set between us.

Judah sent me away then,
Sent me to be a widow in my father's house,
Telling me to wait for his third son
Whom we both knew would never come.

So I went -- what choice did I have?
I went back to my father's house,
A shamed widow,
Bringing shame to the whole household
Where the men glared their disgust at me
While the women made their desperate sacrifices
To Ashterah lamenting my barrenness.

I could not join the women
But lay numb in my shadowy corner
Too exhausted to sleep
Too famished to eat
Too weary to think,
Trying only to grasp a memory
Of what hope
I had found in Judah's God.

How many day or Sabbaths or moons passed by
I do not know,
Only that one day I heard a whispered voice through the window
Saying that Shua, Judah's wife, had died.
From my fog I heard the women wailing,
And then silence.

Slowly, oh so slowly,
Emerging from dreamless stupor,
I began to recognize a pinpoint of light
Like a single star on thick clouded night.
And I woke to view Abraham's shy
Beaming with the countless stars
Of El-Shaddai's promise
A promise to bless

Judah was now free,
Available,
To marry again.

But a man willing to sell his own brother
Surely would not stop to redeem his son's wife,
To make matters right,
To do his duty.

But I might go to him.
I might use his blindness
To help him see.
I might use his disregard for women
To bring about regard for one woman.

The roaring of lions in the wilderness
Echoed through my body
For several tossing turning nights.
My belly wretched into knots,
And yet the gleeful justice of it all
Would not leave me be.

So when the news drifted through the open window:
That Judah was bringing his sheep into town for shearing,
My body acted without conscious thought.

The body which he had discarded
Wrapped itself in new garb.
The face he had removed from his sight
Shrouded itself in a veil.
For the first time in my life,
I became the tall, graceful palm tree
That my name suggests.

As I waited by the side of the road
At the entrance to our village,
I didn't have to wait long for him to arrive
Not did I have to wait long for him to speak to me.
I hoped that if he could see my smile
Behind the veil
He would think it hospitality
Rather than mirth:
For he, whose last words to me had been banishment,
Was now suggesting payment if I join with him!

It was hard not to snort as his 'offer':
He offered as payment a kid from his flock.
How would a kid from his flock
Recompense the shame he had given me?
And how could I acknowledge his word as pledge?

No, what was just and right I asked for that day.
A guarantee I demanded:
His signet on its cord
And his staff.
His signet: the sign of all his patriarchal power.
And his staff: his very support and protection.

I asked for them
And El-Shaddai blessed me.
I trembled at the holiness with which they lay in my hand.
Then he lay with me.
And then he was gone.
But the power and the protection I still held in my hand.

I hurried home
Not really caring anymore
Who would see.

Back in my widow's clothes,
In my widow's corner,
I gathered the signet and the staff
And hid them in the shadows.

A few days later there was much murmuring in town
As Judah and his friend tried to locate
The cult prostitute to whom he owed his fare --
The kid from his flock --
Was it Ashterah's fertility cult he was seeking?
I bit my lip to hide my mirth.

Sometimes in the darkness
I would take the signet and staff out from the shadows
And hold them in my hand
And look out at the countless stars
And bless Judah's God, El-Shaddai.

It was on a dark early morning like that
When I first felt the heaviness in my breasts
And the swaying tide in my belly,
And after many puzzled moments
I realized El-Shaddai's blessings
Had far exceeded my wildest dream.
There was life within me,
And with that life, there was hope
And a promise of blessing.

It was the retching that gave my widow's secrets away.
And soon word got to Judah
That his daughter-in-law
(yes, now I suddenly was his daughter-in-law again
And not merely a widow in my father's house!)
Judah's daughter-in-law was pregnant!

Good ol' roaring Judah!
Not enough to order me stoned:
Burning was his demand!
The women came to me with eyes wild

Some wildly indignant with me
A few wildly disbelieving
Fewer still wildly grieving for me in silence.

El-Shaddai led my hand to the shadow
And the signet and staff emerged.
I placed them in another hand
And told them to show them to Judah:
The signet and the staff belonged to the man
Whose child was within me.

The rest you know:
How Judah's eyes were finally opened
To his own complicity in a system that had regard
Only for roaring
Instead of blessing.

How I was blessed,
Indeed, doubly blessed!
With fine strong twin boys, Perez and Zerah,
Who were learning of sharing the blessings
Even as they tussled in my womb.

Judah's roaring is somewhat softer now.
He likes to see the boys:
Two sons gained for two sons lost!
But he's still a little afraid of me,
He never comes to sleep with me,
But all the same, I'm blessed.
Not everyone, certainly not every woman,
Is so blessed.
Judah's sister, Dinah –
Ah, but that's another story,
And the sun is getting low,
and soon the stars will be out --
You'd best be on your way.

Thanks for listening to me.
Telling the story helps.
It gives me hope that others, too,
Can find a way past the roaring
Into blessing.
Go in peace.

Reflection

I wonder what thoughts went through your head as you heard Tamar's story –
I wonder if you had heard her story before!

I wonder if you think Tamar did the right thing in tricking her father-in-law –
When he had seemingly abandoned her
I wonder if you think Tamar did the right thing in pretending to be a prostitute...
What *was* 'right' in her situation?
Many have noted that the ability to 'trick' those in power
Is a creative option to those who feel they have no power...
Indeed the Hebrew Bible is especially full of 'tricksters' –
From the stories of Jacob and Rachel and Leah and so many others...
Is 'tricking' an essential weapon in the battle for justice?

We'd like to think that our world is a much more just place now –
But we're still aware that there is still much injustice –
Is there still a place for victimised persons to resort to trickery today?
How do we decide whose trickery is reasonable and whose is not?

I wonder who passed Tamar's story down
And why it was felt important enough to be recorded in the scriptures?
I suspect it was important to those who found themselves belittled or discarded –
Perhaps it gave them hope to strive for a better situation
For themselves and those they loved...
Perhaps Tamar's 'legacy' was more than her two twin sons –
The fact that her name is listed in Matthew's genealogy
Makes me think Jesus might have heard her story as well –
Did he hear it from his mother and grandmother –
Or from the rabbis in the synagogue?
I wonder how Tamar's legacy might have affected Jesus' understanding of the Law...
I wonder how what her legacy says to us today....

Prayers of intercession

Lord, as we remember again Tamar and her story

We give you thanks that she was able to take control of her own life –
That she found a way to turn a tragic story into a positive testimony.
We thank you for her courage and her determination to follow justice.

Today we remember others trapped in a cycle of domestic abuse –

For all those who find themselves threatened or in danger in their own homes –
For women and children – and some men –
Who are bullied or abused, coerced, controlled
Not treated with respect
Made to feel less than loved
Or abandoned or neglected altogether

We pray for those who have the courage to escape the danger

We pray for those who are unable to escape
That somehow they would still know your love,
Even if those around them have shown no love.

We pray for those who attempt to care for those escaping

For half-way houses and refuges
For friends and outside family members seeking to do what they can to help.

We thank you for those who keep believing in the worth of those who abused,
even when they cannot themselves believe in their own worth.

Lord, we pray for the healing of those who have been abused.

We pray as well for the abusers – for so many who seek to hurt others

Either because they have been hurt themselves
Or because they know no other way.

We pray for counsellors and social workers, for prison chaplains and parole officers,
For all those who seek to rehabilitate those who have abused.

Lord, we pray for our churches as well –

That we might continue to offer places of sanctuary
And be places of welcome as well as of safety for all your children.

And let us pray for ourselves – asking forgiveness for the times we have done wrong,
For the times we have not helped those in despair...

Lord's Prayer...

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Pray for a world where every child
Finds welcome in a sheltered place.
Where love is tender, undefiled,
And firmness intertwines with grace.

Pray for a world where passion's fire
Burns not in force or careless lust,
Where God's good gift of deep desire
Is safe in arms of faith and trust.

Pray for a nation just and fair
That seeks the welfare of us all,
Where leaders guide with prudent care
And nurture life for great and small.

Pray for a world where all have voice
And none will batter, rape, abuse.
Till then, may all have rightful choice
And pray for wisdom as they choose.

■ Ruth C. Duck

Benediction:

The God, El-Shaddai, who has blessed Tamar and nameless others through the centuries,
Bless us today
Making us aware of our blessings
Making us aware of what true justice looks like
Making each of us aware of our responsibility
To work with God for all that is good and right and true. Amen!