

**January 14 2023 –
Women Who Prepared the Way
Tamar**

Good morning. It is good to be back this morning after our family trip out West – a trip that saw us back in Waterloo at a nice and early 4:30 in the morning on Monday after a 4-hour delay at the airport! Despite the delay in our return, we had a lovely trip, although we packed so much in that we also have been feeling like this has been a week of recovery, trying to catch up on sleep after the busy Christmas season and after our trip that capped the season off and after our early morning return. Having moved through the Christmas season as a congregation too, this morning we find ourselves in a season of “afters” – after Advent, after Christmas, after Epiphany. In fact, in the church’s liturgical calendar, the Sunday’s that follow Epiphany and precede Lent are simply called “after Epiphany,” which we celebrated last Sunday. Perhaps we are also feeling like we are still trying to get our bearings straight as a congregation after all these “afters.” Maybe a key question we should ask this morning is, “How should all that has happened over the last month or so continue to impact us?” Although Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany are in the past for us, perhaps we need to find a way to dwell longer with the questions and the answers of this season we’ve rushed through, even though it might be easy for that to happen with the busy return to our more regular schedules.

One way that our worship planning committee thought we might be able to dwell a bit longer with the significance of the Advent and Christmas season – with the season in which we wait for and then proclaim God’s coming among us in Jesus – is to plan a worship series that draws us deeper into the big-picture of the family stories that precedes Jesus’ birth. We can all relate to family stories in one way or another – we all have some kind of family story, no matter how diverse our family structures might be or who we consider our “family” to be. Family

stories are also undoubtably complicated, characterized by a mixture of beauty and brokenness – this is something we often become especially aware of during the Christmas season. And yet we are not alone in this - this mixture of beauty and brokenness is present in the many family stories that prepared the way for Jesus’ birth too. These families, ranging from the Patriarch Abraham and the Matriarch Sarah and leading all the way to Joseph and Mary, had their own moments of beauty and brokenness. Author Joanna Harader has written a powerful Advent devotional on the family history, the genealogy of Jesus, and more specifically, of the women in that genealogy who “prepared the way” for Jesus. The devotional is called *Expecting Emmanuel*¹ and in it, she seeks to “attend to the stories of...women who are listed in the genealogy of Jesus” in such a way as to consider “how their humanity connects with ours, how God is present with us all, and what it means to claim that the divine One became human in the infant Jesus.”² It is a powerful devotional, one that is worth attending to, even in this season of “afters” that we find ourselves in. I pray that as we consider the stories of five of the women in Jesus’ genealogy, that we might indeed discern how each woman’s humanity connects with ours, how God is present with us all, and what it means to say that God came to us in Jesus.

This morning in the playfully performed “Matthew’s Begats,” we got the broad sweep of Jesus’ genealogy as it appears in Matthew 1:1-16. For the remainder of my sermon this morning, however, we are going to focus in on verse three of that genealogy where we encounter the family of Judah, who was the father of Perez and Zerah *by Tamar*. “By Tamar,” this designation, along with the designation of other women in Jesus’ genealogy, should stand out to readers. Why? Because often biblical genealogies didn’t include women – a feature of genealogies that is grounding in the broader legacy of patriarchy, the social system “in which the father or eldest

¹ Joanna Harader, *Expecting Emmanuel: Eight Women Who Prepared the Way* (Herald Press: 2022).

² *Ibid.* 11-12.

male is head of the family and [through whom] descent is traced,” a reality that continues today in many ways.³ The social system of patriarchy has had far reaching effects beyond just the fact that with it descent has been traced through the men of the family, however. Patriarchy, as a social system that was explicitly operative in biblical times and continues in various ways through to today, ensured that men owned most of the land and passed it on to their male progeny and that men occupied most positions of political, religious, and judicial power in society. Women, in this system, were economically dependent on men, were in a position of significant disadvantage socially speaking, and often were confined to the management of home and family life, although even there they would have to cede authority to the husband or father.⁴ Furthermore, as many of the patriarchal narratives of scripture make excruciatingly clear, the well-being and social status of women were often dependent on their ability to bear children, especially male children, to carry forward the line of male-descent.

Much of the way the scriptural story unfolds is impacted by the social system of patriarchy – a social system that the bible’s authors shared with surrounding societies of all kinds – it was not unique in that way. Some take the bible’s implicit acceptance of patriarchy as somehow endorsing it as a social system or claiming that it was set up that way by divine design. But as Jewish scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes, the authors of many of the biblical narratives and laws did not so much seek to justify or construct patriarchy as they simply just assumed it, much like they assumed the institution of slavery without questioning it.⁵ Perhaps the more interesting fact, however, one that Frymer-Kensky also notes, is that despite the fact that the bible’s authors were squarely situated in their own time and place and operated with their own

³ This definition is from *Oxford Languages* procured through Google.

⁴ Cf. The description of patriarchy in Frymer-Kensky’s *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), pp. xiii-xiv.

⁵ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, Xiv-xv.

social assumptions about the rightness of patriarchy, they also found themselves frequently pushing against “the status quo” and telling stories that claimed that “God elevates the lowly, brings the marginalized to the center, and raises high the socially inferior.”⁶ There is a tension, then, in many of the bible’s stories – a tension between the social systems that propped up the status quo and those who challenged that status quo as they followed God; a tension between social systems that ignored and suppressed the worth of some in society and those who recognized and elevated the worth of the disadvantaged in society. As we read the stories of women in the bible, including Tamar’s today, that tension is very apparent.

Speaking of which, it is about time we turned to Tamar’s story.⁷ A bit of background info might be helpful to begin. Tamar’s name appears within the larger narrative of Jacob’s children through his wives Leah and Rachel. One of Leah’s sons was Judah and one of Rachel’s sons was Joseph. Judah, you might recall, was the brother who, after Joseph was thrown in the pit, suggested that he and his other jealous brothers sell Joseph into slavery, and of course we read in Genesis 37 that they did just that. Well, the next chapter begins by saying that after this incident, Judah left his brothers and his family home to begin his life elsewhere and initially, it would appear that Judah does quite well for himself. He meets new friends, including an Adullamite man named Hirah, and he also meets a Canaanite man named Shua along with his daughter whom Judah later took to be his wife. Throughout the whole story that ensues, Judah’s wife is left unnamed. We are then told that Judah’s wife bears him three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah, a sign that God has blessed him. Tamar enters the story, seemingly from out of nowhere, when we

⁶ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, Xv.

⁷ As will be clear below, I am deeply indebted to Tikva Frymer-Kensky’s account of Tamar’s story as she narrates it in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, pp.264-277.

learn that once little Er has grown up, “Judah took a wife” for him and that wife’s name was Tamar.

A quick note about the name Tamar (from which the more familiar name Tamara comes), it means “date palm tree” and it was a tree known to bear wonderful fruit and lots of it. Already, it seems, Judah has seemed to have had a fruitful life apart from his own father’s house with starting a family elsewhere and having three kids and now he hopes his son Er will carry on the pattern of fruitfulness through his marriage to Tamar. As Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes, however, while Tamar’s name suggests the possibility of fertility and so potential to carry on Judah’s lineage through his son Er, this fertility is not assured. Direct and intentional action is needed to ensure that Tamar, like a date palm, will indeed bear fruit.⁸ The rest of Tamar’s story outlines the central problem as it concerns Judah – will he have grandchildren born through Tamar and carry on his line – and as it concerns Tamar, will she bear children and so secure for herself the very limited amount of social and economic power and status that she can have?

Well, problems appear immediately. Judah’s son Er, we are told bluntly, was wicked in God’s sight and before any child can be conceived for Er and Tamar, Genesis says “the LORD put him to death.” Now Tamar’s a widow and Judah’s line is in jeopardy. No problem, however, because there was a solution for such situations and that was the Levirate institution. In

Deuteronomy 25:5-6 (NRS) it says that

When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall [perform] the duty of a husband's brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

⁸ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 266.

So, problem solved – now Onan can do his brotherly duty to ensure that Judah’s line can be carried forward. Well, despite a seeming solution to this problem, there’s another problem. Onan is not a good person either – in fact, he’s greedy. Knowing that Tamar’s firstborn son will automatically have rights to his deceased brother’s inheritance, Onan stands to personally inherit more wealth if his deceased brother’s line does not continue. So, Onan takes steps to ensure that Tamar does not get pregnant. Well, for this wickedness, can you guess what happens? Yup, he is put to death also. So, now things get really complicated, don’t they? Because from the outside looking in, Judah is seeing his sons, one by one, dying off and he’s not sure for what reason other than he knows that Tamar is the one commonality – unfortunately he did not have the sight to recognize the wickedness of his sons.

At this point, Judah has a few options within Israelite law: First, he can have his one remaining son Shelah perform the levirate. The ensuing narrative would suggest that Shelah was still a bit too young for that at the time, but Tamar could have been asked to wait for him to be old enough. Second, however, it was also legal for Judah in this special circumstance, to act as levirate. Third, Judah could release Tamar from his family, thus allowing for the provision of her future economic security within another family. Well, Judah takes none of these options, although he pretends to take the first. He tells Tamar to go home to her Father’s house to live as a “widow” and to wait for Shelah to grow up. Judah’s true motive is clear, however: he doesn’t want Shelah to marry Tamar, because he’s afraid Shelah will die too. Judah also refuses to perform the Levirate himself, possibly on account of the same fear. Notice what happens to Tamar in all of this. She is sent home as a “widow” – but she is not a true widow because she is still linked to Judah’s family and must wait for him to decide her fate. She has no recourse to find a life outside of Judah’s family and yet Judah refuses to give her an option for inclusion in the

family. If she tries to seek a life outside of Judah's line, she faces violence, even death. What action can Tamar take at this point? The reader is left to wonder whether she will live up to her name.

And then, we come to the moment in the story where Tamar takes control of her fate – where she acts and stands up for herself in the way that she could within the constraints of her time. After a long time had passed and it was clear that Judah was never going to have Shelah perform the Levirate, Tamar got news that her mother-in-law, Judah's wife, had passed away. Furthermore, she was told that Judah was going to be shearing his sheep not far off from where Tamar was living. And so, she hatched a plan. If her father-in-law would not have his son perform his duty and if he himself would not perform his duty, then Tamar would take action to ensure that he did even if he didn't know he was doing it. And so, she took off her "widow's garments," concealed her face, and sat at the gate ironically called "The Eye-Opener," knowing that Judah would pass by there. Judah saw her and assumed she was a prostitute and propositioned her. She accepted, on the condition that he give her something in return. Judah suggests a goat from the flock and while she accepts, she asks for a pledge to hold onto until he sends to the goat – to ensure that he will be true to his word. Judah asks what kind of pledge would be sufficient and she suggests his "seal," "cord," and "staff," which Frymer-Kensky notes is like the equivalent of Judah's "credit card."⁹ The deal was made and the deed was done. So now what?

Upon returning home, Judah stands by his pledge, so he sends someone with a goat from his flock to bring it to the place where he assumed this prostitute frequented, although she was nowhere to be found. Judah is confused but ultimately says, hey – I lived up to my end of the

⁹ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 272.

bargain – that’s on her if she wasn’t there to collect, and assumes the rest is history. Except, then three months later Judah gets notice that his daughter-in-law Tamar is pregnant, and the assumption is that this was due to shameful, “faithless acts.”¹⁰ Judah’s judgement is swift as he calls for her, the supposedly unrighteous, to be burned. But as Tamar is being brought out, she sends word to her father-in-law along with his seal and cord and staff saying “take note” or “recognize” please whom these belong to. And upon seeing these items, Judah now has his eyes opened – he recognizes, not only these items, but he recognizes that he has been the unrighteous one in all of this, that the shame is all his, and that Tamar has been righteous. He says: "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." (Genesis 38:26)

The end of Tamar’s story as the biblical narrative tells it comes with the birth of her twin boys, Peretz and Zerah. As Frymer-Kensky notes, “Judah applauds Tamar’s action and God rewards it. Her boldness, initiative, and willingness to defy society’s expectations have enabled God to provide Judah with two new sons after the death of his first two sons.”¹¹ How does Tamar’s story stir our imaginations today? What questions does she ask of us? I hope we can talk about this in worship response time, but for now, let me suggest a few thoughts. Tamar lived in a world of societal and familial obstacles – patriarchy was a major one – but there were many. Her story is a story told a billion times since – women in lower positions of power needing to do what they could do stand up for themselves and make a future for themselves in what is often a cruel world. One of the key themes in Tamar’s story was the theme of recognition – being seen – seen as a human being whose full humanity mattered.

In her devotional *Expecting Emmanuel*, Joanna Harader begins by saying:

“To believe in the incarnation, that God became human in the person of Jesus, is to believe that humanity matters. It is to take our humanity—and the humanity of others—

¹⁰ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 272.

¹¹ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 274.

seriously, to hold it tenderly, to consider it honestly. If the Word truly became flesh, then attending to human emotions, human bodies, and human stories can help us understand the strangely present power of God in our all-too-human lives.”¹²

Might I suggest with Harader that one of the challenges that Tamar’s story continues to press upon us today is the challenge to recognize, with seriousness, tenderness, and honesty, the humanity of those around us, especially those who are in disadvantaged positions in our communities and in our world. And might I also suggest that Tamar’s boldness and courage is an example to us all, calling us to stand up for ourselves and for others when structural sins and evils aim to push us and others down or unjustly shame them. May it be so – may we be bold like Tamar and stand up for the worth and dignity of those made in the image of God, the image of Emmanuel – God with us in the lowly. AMEN.

¹² Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 12.