



The Only Four (plus Mary)

One of the best sermons I ever heard was about the genealogy of Jesus in the first chapter of Matthew. Weird, right? It's the passage you are thinking of with all the "begats." Who preaches on that? A preacher who, it turns out, I'd had an intense, unrequited crush on in college, that's who.

Years after I got over that crush, I went to a Christmas Eve service with my new husband's family. It was a charming Protestant church in eastern Kentucky with the pews set up in arcs around the central dais, the full-immersion baptismal swimming pool behind the altar. The preacher, my old crush, spoke about how he was new to the congregation and was still trying to figure out how everyone was related—or, as we say in Kentucky, how you're kin. He spoke about the expectations we have of folks we're kin to, how we view some folks in the family based on who else they're kin to, and what it means to be in a family together. He said he'd always thought Jesus—mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace—would be kin to all kinds of faithful, righteous folk, that his perfection would be reflected in his family tree. About that: Jesus' family is full of murderers and adulterers and just difficult people. I can relate.

What I find fascinating about Jesus' kin in that long, boring "begat" passage is the four women who are listed. Of the forty

generations named in that list, only four people are women: Tamar the Trickster, Rahab the Prostitute, Bathsheba the wife of Uriah, and Ruth the Filthy Foreigner. Plus, at the end, there's Mary the mother of Jesus, not actually related to any of the other people. What an odd collection. Scholars have written heaps of articles about why these four and what they have in common besides, you know, being in the genealogy. They're all outsiders to the Jewish people, who prided themselves on their clear national boundaries. Their sexuality is a huge part of their stories in a culture where women's bodies were not valued. They were important enough, interesting enough, maybe difficult enough to merit Matthew's mentioning them alongside all the other difficult kin.

So thanks, Former Crush, for bringing them to my attention.



Tamar

When Sleeping with Your Father-in-Law Is Righteous

As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "It was the owner of these who made me pregnant." And she said, "Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." Then Judah acknowledged them and said, "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not lie with her again.

—GENESIS 38:25–26

I'm not going to lie to you: Tamar is a bad-ass. It's not like you'd know it, since we don't ever read about her in church. There aren't any charming nursery wallpapers or knitting patterns depicting her Bible story. And honestly, the story is awkward for modern audiences. For all I know, it was awkward back in the day as well.

Tamar lived in Canaan, the area of the ancient Middle East that was both delightfully verdant and populated with filthy, sexually threatening Canaanites. Later it was called the Promised Land and even later the nation of Israel. Canaan was more of a region than a country, and all kinds of folks lived there, including Jews. I'm telling you all this because the word *Canaan* is heavy with meaning. It was the country that the Israelites entered after

wandering in the desert for forty years and that apparently flowed with milk and honey. Canaan was both the destination that was longed for during the exodus and a catchall word for foreigners who good Jews could not mix with (here, “mix with” means to have sex and children with). Canaan was a liminal space—that is, a place of transition where multiple experiences are true simultaneously. Like I said, awkward. This is where Tamar was from; these were her kin.

Judah, our other main character, was one of Joseph’s brothers. You remember Joseph: he got the Technicolor dream coat and interpreted dreams and was a little bit of an ass to his brothers. Judah was the oldest of the brothers and had settled down with his family in Canaan, in the region of the Adullamites. The Adullamites were all right in his book, so he negotiated for his eldest son, Er, to marry one of them, Tamar. It’s too bad Er has fallen out of popularity in baby name books, but it turns out he was wicked in the sight of the Lord, so maybe it’s for the best. We don’t know the details of his wickedness, but it was bad enough that God killed him—just dropped him right there, like it was nothing. Poor Tamar, to have her husband die so quickly. It’s not that she loved him passionately, the way you might read in a romance novel (“Her breath came quickly now at the touch of his hand on hers; she’d never had such a strong physical response to a man before . . .”). No, even though she was property and part of a legal transaction, Tamar might have grown to care for Er, as her mother did for her father. They might have had a mutually fulfilling partnership. Or maybe not, what with his wickedness in the sight of the Lord.

Never fear, though: Judah’s family practiced levirate marriage, which meant that if a man died, his next-oldest brother would marry the wife, and their future children would be raised as the children of the dead brother. It was a kind of creepy way to carry on a family name, but that sort of thing was important then. It still is, come to that. So Tamar was married off to Er’s brother Onan. “Okay,” she might have thought, “I knew this was

a possibility. Onan is a good man. Let's do this." But Onan, it seems, was also wicked in the sight of the Lord; only this time, we know what he did. Because he didn't care for levirate marriage and wanted his kids to have *his* name, when he had sex with Tamar, he practiced coitus interruptus. He ejaculated onto the ground so Tamar wouldn't get pregnant. So, of course, God killed him, too. Poor Tamar, to have her second husband die so quickly. Tamar might have thought, "Are you kidding me? And still no kids. What the hell?"

Fun fact: The church for centuries used this story as a warning not to masturbate, but that really isn't what's going on here. The science of the time said that semen, rather than containing half of the genetic code for a person, was basically tiny, complete babies that would be implanted in the woman, who was just an incubator. So Onan's sin was wasting human lives. It was also disobedience to authority—kind of a theme in the Bible, beginning with Eve and Adam.

Never fear, though: Judah had a third son, Shelah. However, he was still too young to marry, so Judah sent Tamar back to her family, promising to wed her to Shelah when he was old enough. It was a thin excuse. Judah feared for his son's life if he married him to this black widow. His two sons' deaths couldn't have been their fault; they were upright members of the family, so obviously she was doing something to them. Best to send her away. Now, it's pivotal to know that at the time, women's only worth was in producing children—male children in particular. Women went from being part of their father's household to part of their husband's household. To be part of neither was a singular shame and a perplexing space. Tamar was no longer her father's property or her husband's, nor was she yet Shelah's wife. She was in a liminal space among the three. Poor Tamar, to be sent home in disgrace—a woman without a home, powerless.

Later—years later, it seems, since Shelah was now old enough to marry but had not yet taken Tamar—Judah's wife died. He took

his Adullamite friend and went out into the pastures to work with his sheep again. Maybe he'd been caught up in caring for his wife over a long illness, or maybe he just needed to work off his grief by shearing and milking, but this was a new thing, going to the pastures. He had to travel a ways to get there.

Tamar heard of her mother-in-law's death, of Judah's new-found passion for shearing and milking, and of course, she observed that she had not yet been married to Shelah. He was long since old enough to marry. What was the holdup? Tamar was sitting home, every day falling deeper and deeper into disgrace, stared at as she walked from one part of the camp to another, whispered about with pity and knowing glances. And there was Judah heading out to get his own life going again while Tamar's was dying on the vine.

"So that's how it is," she thought. Simmering with the injustice of it, her brain going over the possibilities, she decided to take back what was hers. Poor Tamar no longer, she took off her widow's weeds and dressed herself up with jewelry and her finest clothing and covered her face with a veil. No one would recognize her this way. She hurried ahead to the gate at Enaim, a transition point between the land of the Adullamites and the next region over—a kind of border crossing. She sat at the gate, waiting for her father-in-law, her plan taking shape.

Judah, out of breath from walking far from his home and ready for an overnight stop, saw Tamar sitting at the gate. He saw her, and he wanted her. Obviously she was a prostitute; who else would sit at the gate with her face covered? He was tired, he was in mourning, and he had money. Why not hire her to warm his bed that night? Realizing that he, in fact, did not have money with him, he offered her a baby goat in payment to be sent on later—like, "Baby, I'll get you an iPhone after we get it on." Tamar was not stupid and asked for collateral on his payment: his signet, cord, and staff—his identification, irreplaceable. He trusted this "prostitute" he'd just met, and he willingly turned them over and followed her to bed.

There is no description of their sexy times, no Song of Songs-style “midsections like ivory,” no uncovering of feet or thighs. It happened between sentences. Was it a quick-and-dirty transaction? Did they both get what they wanted but not really? Afterward, she changed her clothes back to her widow’s weeds and returned home, ready to play the long game. Judah sent his Adul-lamite friend back to her with the baby goat, but comically, the townspeople say in unison, “There ain’t never been a prostitute at the gate. Nope, not a one.” Judah had to go home without making a fuss, because it was embarrassing. He’d trusted this stranger, he’d lost his identification, and they couldn’t even find one lousy prostitute. Just hush it up; it’s fine, it’ll be fine.

Of course, it was not fine. Three weeks later, Tamar was pregnant, and word got back to Judah: “Guess who’s knocked up? Your daughter-in-law who couldn’t get pregnant with your first two sons, who died under mysterious circumstances! Mazel tov!” Judah was pissed and ordered her to be burned alive for her treachery. Tamar, with ovaries of steel, calmly said she knew who the father of the child was and wouldn’t you like to know, dearest father-in-law? She said, “I’ve got his signet, cord, and staff right here, and as we all know, those can’t be faked with today’s technology. You’ll know for sure who knocked me up if you see them.” Judah, full of his superior indignation, said, “Bring them out. He, too, will burn!”

Oh, son, wrong answer. “Take note whose these are,” she said, probably with a saucy glint in her eye, thinking, “Don’t mess with me, fellas.” His eyes fell on his own signet, cord, and staff, which he’d believed lost forever to the disappearing prostitute of Enaim, and everyone gasped. It was like an ancient episode of Maury Povich: “You are the father.”

You’d think he’d go into a rage, have her killed anyway, and be lauded for ridding their community of such a threatening and unhinged woman. Amazingly, he affirmed that he was the father and then, making everyone’s jaw drop, said she was more righteous than he. He had not done right by his daughter-in-law, so she was

right in her devious plan. Intentionally sleeping with your father-in-law to trap him in his lies is more righteous than protecting your third son from possible death. Interesting.

If you're like me, you're thinking, "You show him, Tamar!" and also "What am I supposed to do with this?" at the same time. It's weird to see an incestuous, extramarital affair held up as a good thing. God, it would seem, is about mess and dark comedy as much as righteousness and stability. Being a wife and mother was Tamar's right, so she retrieved it from Judah with the means she had, however unsavory. It was her job to stand up for herself. Tamar's actions are justified by the genealogy writers, who listed her in the lineage of King David as having had sons *by Judah*. That one-night stand made possible King David and, eventually, Jesus son of Mary.

Tamar is what we call a trickster, a character in folklore around the world who breaks rules, turns culture on its head, and uses deception to show truth. Tricksters often work in selfish ways, but their tricks reveal the dishonesty of others. Tricksters show us that things don't have to be the way they've always been, that the way things are—whatever that is to you in your time and place—is changeable. You know what they're doing is wrong on some level, but it's also deliciously right and so hilarious and awkward that you can't look away.

Tricksters are considered heroes. Think about Bugs Bunny or Anansi from West Africa or Loki in Nordic myth. Think about Abraham, who twice passed off his wife Sarah as his sister, "accidentally" sold her to kings, and became wealthy himself. Think of Judith, who fooled her enemy Holofernes into thinking she loved him before cutting off his head and saving her people. Think of Jacob, who cheated everyone he came into contact with and was the namesake of the Israelite people. Even then, folks knew that the system didn't work, that it ended up hurting the very people it's supposed to help. Sometimes the system, the culture, needs to take itself less seriously.

Tamar reminds me that the systems we live in are still unjust and secretive, and sometimes they need to be tricked to reveal themselves. Edward Snowden is a modern trickster. He leaked thousands of documents showing massive surveillance and privacy violation by the United States government. He is a traitor to country but a hero to humanity—a person between truths, like Tamar.

You may not have heard of Alexandra Elbakyan, a Kazakhstani researcher. She created a website called Sci-Hub, which evades the paywalls on all online scientific publishing and archival sites, allowing researchers free access to a huge amount of necessary information. That may seem like piracy—actually, it is; it is piracy. But it's important to know that the researchers whose work is published on those sites are not paid for their work, and the fees to access the information are so exorbitant that even institutions like Harvard have canceled their subscriptions. Alexandra Elbakyan is a modern trickster, creating a clearly illegal tool to reform an exploitative system. She, too, is a woman between truths.

Tamar the Trickster says, “Things are not as they should be; things are not as God dreams them to be.” I'm not much of a trickster myself. My husband is constantly amazed at how little I can keep a secret. I almost gave away his birthday surprise party fifteen times. I don't know how to hold my feelings and thoughts back—but I haven't had to be devious. My life as a middle-class, cisgender, white lady is pretty damned stable. But on the college campus where I work, Tamar sits next to me and reminds me that each person I meet struggles with injustice. She asks me to withhold judgment when a student's actions smack of piracy or tricks. When peer advocates for students who've been sexually assaulted have their program put in limbo and they respond with angry protest and secret filming of administrators, it makes me very uncomfortable. Yet they are using what they have to reform an exploitative system.

Out in the world, human traffickers target foster kids because they won't be missed: those kids are in a liminal space between

family and disaster. It only takes a moment to tip one way or the other. Lots of folks live in that liminal space and use what they have to get what they need, but we don't see them. Likewise, Judah didn't really see Tamar until she showed him his hypocrisy.

This is Tamar's lineage as well as being a Canaanite. She is somewhere between a virgin and a wife, somewhere between insider and outsider. She is on the edge of society, where tricksters are born and where God's power is most obvious. New things happen there that just can't happen in the staid, respectable middle. And in tricking those in power, Tamar is hilarious.

Put that in a knitting pattern.