

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL

August 19, 2012

"A Seldom-told Tale"

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.

Text-2 Samuel 13: 1-22

The text from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning takes us to the end of King David's reign, poised for the beginning of that of his son Solomon – his son by Bathsheba. Last week, we heard of the death of another son, Absalom and David's grief. But I'm going to circle back a bit and tell you another story. One that you will never hear if we follow our lectionary readings even though it is part of the long saga of David that has been featured this summer.

This is not my story. It's from this book. From 2 Samuel, and it takes place long before the death of Absalom. As with much of David's saga, which as Warren told us a few weeks ago, is full of murder and mayhem, this is not a happy story – it is disturbing, even brutal. Not exactly what many of us would like to hear on a lovely summer Sunday.

This takes place rather late in David's saga. Earlier we learn that he was chosen by God to be king when he was just a shepherd boy. A few weeks ago, we talked about how he united the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah, making Jerusalem the religious center that became known as the City of David. This is the David who has been remembered through the ages. The ideal king, fully faithful to YHWH, even called "a man after God's own heart." This David is the basis for the messianic hope of Judaism – that hope of returning once again and restoring the everlasting united kingdom. It is also a fundamental story for the writers of the Christian Gospels who portrayed Jesus as the fulfillment of this hope and made every effort to show the connections through all the generations from the house of David to Jesus.

The story I tell you this morning, though, comes to us in a section that is more about the private than the public David, where some of his characteristics are revealed that are not so much about courage and charismatic leadership. Here we see his humanity, his vulnerability, his ability to grieve and experience anguish. We also see his less attractive nature – his scheming and self-centeredness, his abuses of power. These stories, filled with power and intrigue, begin with his indiscretion – taking the beautiful Bathsheba, even though she already has a husband. Since he is king, he takes care of that inconvenient fact by having the husband killed. Though he repents and is forgiven by God, tragic consequences have been unleashed and tragedies speckle the remainder of David's life like a rash.

So listen now to one of these tragic tales. I purposely did not include it one in the texts read because I wanted to tell it to you. I wanted you to hear it rather than read it.

[2 Samuel 13: 1-22]

Let me ask you – have you ever heard this before? Did you know there was such a story in the Bible? I know that I wonder why the story is there – why it survived the editors of the Bible. I suspect that it is only because this story provides some continuity – the reason that one of his older sons did not succeed David as king clearing the path for Solomon to do so. You see, both of those older sons died – Amnon at the hand of Absalom in revenge for what he did to Tamar; Absalom in a war against his father. This is not really about Tamar, though or we would have known more about what happened to her later. In her world, she would have no life: she would be shamed and discarded – a throwaway object who might as well be dead. Her father was notably absent to her. But did her mother and sisters gather around her offering comfort and healing? Did she ever find some peace in her life? We do not know.

I wonder even more why the story of Tamar is skipped over in our lectionary. Is it the horror and the tragedy? Is it because we want our biblical characters to be only exemplary models – not flawed, even immoral characters as bad, or even worse, as we are? In movies, TV, and books that contain such violence, there is usually a hero who makes things right in the end. But here, there is no happy ending.

I think, though, that the avoidance goes even deeper. I think that our reluctance has to do with the *huge* issues these stories raise for us. The whole thrust of these books of the Hebrew Scriptures has to do with God's providence – how God's purpose is worked out using mortal human beings – a divine shaping of events in which God does not directly intervene like in the time of Moses but where God's will is accomplished with, through, and sometimes, in spite of, people. And David is especially chosen and loved by God. We want him to be wise and kindly, creating a realm that is just and true. We don't want to see a man who weeps and grieves for his sons but is silent before his daughter's violation! We don't want bad things to happen to good, innocent people. How can an all-powerful and loving God allow such things? Where is the justice? Where is the hope?

Now, let us be clear that God did not will that Tamar be raped. God does not will that a young girl or boy in a city neighborhood be killed in a drive-by shooting or that a family be wiped out by a drunk driver. These terrible things happen as a consequence of human sin and error. David could have lived with greater integrity so he did not set such an example of behavior for his sons. David could have acted on behalf of his daughter and changed the course of events, but he stood silent. David repented and was forgiven. But he was not free from the consequences of his choices.

I also wonder why we *should* tell these stories. There are obvious reasons. Naming the horrors as part of our biblical tradition may help us face similar stories in our own lives. Lifting up the courage and wisdom of Tamar who does not fade away silently in the face of her dishonor but rips her garments and laments loudly for all the world to hear might help others to find their own voices, ending the conspiracy of silence that allows violence to continue (NIB).

Here in Galena and in churches across the country, policies against sexual harassment and molestation have been put into place through the Keeping God's People Safe program in order to keep the most vulnerable among us safe. In order to say clearly that such behavior is not okay – not consistent with our call to love God and neighbor, to look after one another. It is

too bad that we must do this. But for far too long, the conspiracy of silence has existed – misconduct has been ignored, swept under the rug, or even silently condoned. It has taken scandals and courageous people speaking out to begin the change that should not be needed in communities of love and justice. Make no mistake, this is not about “political correctness.” This is about making a clear statement of what we believe – that acts like this may not be tolerated. That we will create an environment of safety and respect for all.

We are reminded by these stories that what we do and how we live our lives does make a difference! The examples we set, the choices we make in thought, in word, and in deed are not isolated but ripple out from us in interconnecting waves. We cannot know who will notice or who will suffer the consequences of a thoughtless or blatantly immoral act. If our children are taught, even in subtle ways, that some people are superior to others, if some are justified in exploiting those who have less power, hatred and discord will survive. If they are taught to look out only for themselves and their wants and desires, even when a little cheating is required, the world and our community will become ever more fractured. If, on the other hand, we teach and live out the belief that all creation is good and interconnected, that we must not only stay connected but must take responsibility for the well-being and dignity of all creatures, think of the healing and transformation that could be unleashed!

Our story this morning says that David was angry about what happened to his daughter. But, he remained silent because of his love for his firstborn son. David’s everlasting kingdom survived less than 100 years. His son and successor, Solomon, in spite of his wisdom and his great works like building the magnificent temple, neglected his relationship with YHWH and with his people. And the people became complacent, believing that God’s promise to David insulated them from all harm. But God would not be taken for granted. At the end of Solomon’s life, God tore the kingdom from Solomon’s hand, retaining only one tribe for the house of David. That one would be a lamp before God in Jerusalem. A lamp of hope that humanity would one day walk in God’s way and restore God’s realm.

We, who call ourselves Christians, have seen that lamp in the person of Jesus. We have walked in that light and been shown the way. We can be assured that God will keep the lamp burning. But it is up to us to bear this light to the dark corners of our world, to reflect its light through our living and our being, and to magnify its light through our ever-growing faithfulness to God and our love and concern for justice for all of God’s people. For it is through us that God’s realm may come to be, one small step at a time.

Amen and amen.