Women of the Bible say #MeToo

Read Tamar or Dinah's story with your church. Listen together for their cries.

by Ruth Everhart in the August 1, 2018 issue

Giuliano di Bugiardini, *The Rape of Dinah,* 16th century.

The #MeToo movement took off because it harnessed the power of personal story. Individual stories can point to a societal problem that goes far beyond any

individual. The witness of the “silence breakers” who collectively were named “Person of the Year” by *Time* magazine and the brave statements of people like Rachael Denhollander, who testified against gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar, are examples of how the telling of stories can reshape culture.

Christians know the importance of story because our sacred texts communicate through story, and some of those are about the suppression and abuse of women. In what Phyllis Trible called its “texts of terror,” the Bible tell harrowing tales of women being raped, sacrificed, and silenced by members of their own family. Violence against women is used as occasion for blood revenge. To hear the women’s cries and learn their stories is to honor each one as a beloved child of God. Their stories can be mined for glimmers of hope, as precious as gold ore, or read as cautionary tales, warnings about what happens when the powerful become corrupt and the vulnerable are silenced.

Consider the story of the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:1–9. (See the longer analysis of this story by Anna Carter Florence, "Listening to Tamar.") Tamar is preyed upon by Amnon, King David’s son and her half brother, who is heir to the throne. He is aided in his attack by a cunning adviser, Jonadab, who concocts the idea that Amnon can lure Tamar to his bedchamber by pretending to be sick and asking her to prepare a special dish before his eyes.

The other powerful character is Absalom, another of David’s sons, a full brother to Tamar. When Absalom learns of Amnon’s rape of Tamar, he is incensed and vows to exact revenge. Since the two brothers are vying for the throne, retribution dovetails conveniently with Absalom’s political agenda.

The character of Tamar is more thoroughly drawn than that of most women in scripture. She has a name, and even her wardrobe is described: “Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves; for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times.” Tamar also has a voice, which she lifts in protest and in reasoned argument when Amnon forces himself on her. “No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! As for me, where could I carry my shame?”

What has Tamar done that’s shameful? She has simply cooked dumplings for her supposedly sick half brother. It’s those around her who act badly, yet she will bear the shame.

Tamar speaks eloquently, urging Amnon to ask properly for her in marriage and anticipating what lies ahead if Amnon continues his assault. As Tamar predicts, Amnon is filled with contempt immediately after he rapes her. Her “good” brother, Absalom, advises her to keep silent about the whole thing. “Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart.” These are empty words, spoken to soothe himself rather than his sister. What he is saying is that he cannot bear to hear her lamentation. The story continues with a rather intricate revenge plot because, as is common in scripture, sexual assault leads to blood revenge, while the original victim is given no solace or voice.

Since shame is overtly named in the passage, the story of Tamar is an excellent one for exploring the experience of shame. This is what patriarchy looks like in action, when women have no good options despite their best efforts. This is what rape victims face: being powerless in the face of power, being silenced no matter how eloquently they may speak, and being covered with contempt that is not deserved.

Contempt arises from the collision of anger and disgust and is the rotten fruit of sexual assault. Anger is part of the dynamic because those in superior situations often rage at their perceived inferiors. Disgust, or bodily revulsion, is part of the dynamic because of misogyny, which is an ancient and impenetrable problem. Why is Amnon filled with revulsion for the same body that tempted him and then satisfied him? The answer cannot be known. What can be known is that Tamar has no agency over any of these events. Yet she must bear the burden of Amnon’s contempt, which feeds her shame and silences her. There are Tamars in our pews. Exploring these dynamics can help victims and survivors find their voice.

Many other stories in scripture can be similarly explored in sermons or study groups. Engaging these stories is not a women’s issue; it is a human issue. One way to explore the stories is to map the locations of power, perhaps by using a Venn diagram. Who has power over whom? From whose point of view is the story told? How would the story be different if told from another viewpoint? It may be useful to bring in parallels from historic or current news stories. It’s also instructive to ask: Why was this story included in scripture? Does the story offer any hope?

Below are some rich texts that invite exploration in the light of women’s experience of abuse. Some of these are true “texts of terror” that feature women being abused and silenced. Others speak of Jesus’ regard for women and his determination to offer them grace and healing. Others are texts that teach us how to lament.

***The story of David and Bathsheba* (2 Sam. 11:1–27):** This is one of the best-known narratives in the Hebrew Bible. I recall learning about it in Sunday school, where it was portrayed as a romance, and a rather titillating one at that. It's a story that involves issues of power, privacy, and consent. David uses his power to summon Bathsheba, a married woman, expressly to have sex with her. Could Bathsheba have said no? Could she have protested? Would she have wanted to? How did she feel about David's attentions? How did she feel when David murdered her righteous husband, Uriah? How did the birth of Solomon heal, or change, the situation?

The Bible tells harrowing tales of corrupt power and of how the vulnerable are silenced.

For an interesting parallel, we can compare Bathsheba's story to that of Sally Hemings, the enslaved woman who gave birth to six of Thomas Jefferson's children. What choices did either woman have? In what ways does a lack of choice echo today? Answering some of these questions is a matter of conjecture, of course, but raising them is a way to address the experience of victims. Clearly Bathsheba had unexpected events forced upon her and was powerless to stop them.

The passage opens: "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle. . . ." This introduction rather blandly assumes that in the spring kings go to battle. Violence is normative. David did not go to battle, but he did make a conquest of Bathsheba. Rape and warfare are frequently connected in biblical narratives, where the sexual assault becomes the reason for war. What dynamics underlie that connection? David is a hero of faith, but what does his life tell us about manhood? Psalm 51 is traditionally ascribed to David and taken as evidence of his repentance. What was he repenting of? It's noteworthy that his repentance did not cleanse his legacy. David's misconduct was visited upon the next generation: Amnon, Absalom, and Tamar.

***The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* (Gen. 19:1–23):** This text has historically been understood as a story about God's condemnation of homosexuality. But when the story is read from the point of view of Lot's daughters, another perspective emerges. Lot extends hospitality to strangers but offers up his own virgin daughters to marauding neighbors. The subsequent passage tells how Lot's daughters attempt to cope after the destruction of the cities. Sometimes women have no good alternatives. Yet, the story declares, God is not absent.

***The rape of Dinah* (Gen. 34:1–31):** The Hebrew scriptures tell us plenty about Dinah's brothers, the 12 sons of Jacob. In the solitary story that features Dinah, the brothers manipulate their sister's trauma for their own political ends. Dinah is raped by Shechem, a prominent leader of a neighboring tribe who wants to marry her. Her brothers are indignant and craftily pretend to form an alliance with Shechem and his tribe members, which needs to be cemented by circumcision. While the men are still healing, the brothers attack, not only killing all the males but also capturing and preying upon the women and children.

This is a story of blood revenge. Perhaps one note of hope here is that the text appears to question the legitimacy of the actions. Parallels can be drawn to contemporary honor killings or to the attacks on girls by Boko Haram. The plight of Dinah, who is not only silent but silenced, highlights a woman's need to have agency over her life. We can at least let her name live on, as worthy as that of her brothers.

***The rape of the concubine* (Judg. 19:1–20:11):** Two men, one of them a Levite, are partying when outsiders threaten them. To protect himself, the Levite puts his concubine outside the door to be gang-raped until she dies. The text paints a horrific detail of his discovery of her body the next morning: "there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold." The Levite then mutilates the dead body, using the pieces to marshal support for war.

The tale may be a warning about how drunkenness and depravity lead to bloodshed. Or it may be a story about what happens when people interpret events to excuse their own sins and advance a self-serving agenda. The detail of the concubine's outstretched hands serves as a plea that extends across millennia to our threshold.

***Jesus heals two daughters* (Mark 5:21–43):** Both daughters in the passage are unnamed. The first is the 12-year-old daughter of Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. The second has been bleeding for 12 years—all the years of the first daughter's life. She is unnamed until Jesus heals her and calls her "Daughter." Her bleeding is not merely a messy inconvenience, but a matter of life and death, as she has bled out all her savings, her social capital, and her body's iron supplies. How does she even keep body and soul together at this point?

To show her exemplary courage and also her faith, the bleeding woman is given something that is rare in scripture, a line of internal dialogue: "If I but touch his

clothes, I will be made well." Her outstretched arm is a symbol of embodied hope.

When Jesus asks, "Who touched me?" he is asking the woman to reveal herself, which may bring negative consequences. But Jesus says, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." This unnamed, bleeding woman—someone who had no one and nothing—is named as kin by Jesus.

As if to double the salvific message, the story returns to Jairus's daughter, who has died in the interim. Jesus travels to Jairus's home and raises the daughter from the dead. His words before departing are some of the most touching in all of scripture: Jesus "told them to give her something to eat." This may be a case where eating is proof that the resurrection is real. I prefer to think that Jesus saw the shock of the parents and wanted to remind them that the daughter had just traveled through the portals of death and back. She was probably hungry!

This text is a powerful antidote to misogyny. In Jesus' eyes, women are not less valuable than men.

The woman caught in adultery **(John 8:1–11):** A preacher might want to speculate about the unnamed, unseen man in this text, or describe the ritual of stoning, or speculate about what it was that Jesus wrote in the sand. Perhaps his words are undisclosed because we are meant to supply them from our own experiences of grace.

One can find parallels in current stories about women expected to pay not only for their own sins but also the sins of the men in their lives. Jesus says, "Neither do I condemn you." It's a passage that calls congregations to a ministry of grace and compassion, especially to those whom others might feel free to denigrate or despise.

Jesus speaks with a Samaritan woman **(John 4:1–30):** This passage topples the barriers of gender, nationality, tribe, and religion. It relays a lengthy and fascinating conversation, complete with overtones of flirtation, sparring, and evasion, all leading to transformation. Preachers can drill down into the gender dynamics at play here, and how shocking Jesus' actions are. How do we respond when Jesus shows so little regard for gender norms?

Jesus heals the bent-over woman **(Luke 13:10–17):** These few verses present an opportunity to speak about women suffering under many different burdens. Some of those burdens are uniquely female. In this story, Jesus is the one to initiate the

touch that heals this woman—and he is charged with violating the law against working on the sabbath. Jesus says, “Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?”

The woman who anointed Jesus **(Mark 14:3–9):** An unnamed woman pours costly ointment on Jesus’ head, causing some to sputter about the waste. The woman was doing what women have always done: tending the body of someone she loved. Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” His words not only celebrate the lavishness of her outpoured love but gather a typically female experience—tending the dying—into the consecration of his table, a table that exists to lift up, again and again, Jesus’ offered and anointed body.

Prayers of lament **(Ps. 55):** The #MeToo movement is essentially a form of lamentation. “Attend to me, and answer me; I am troubled in my complaint.” To lament is to weep, to sob, to wail in the face of injustice. To lament is to mourn what has been lost and to express regret for wrongs done. Lament is both an individual and communal act.

As in Psalm 55, lamentation has three steps: First, it asks for God’s attention. Second, it pours out complaints, no holds barred. Third, it returns to God with a statement of trust. This pattern is repeated throughout scripture. To travel this journey with God is to return to God as a changed person.

Churches may lose touch with lamentation because they are part of the dominant or privileged culture. Historically, it is suppressed peoples who have raised their voices in lamentation. The privileged do not want to hear these cries because that would mean facing their pain. Lamentation is addressed to the Almighty because few others will listen.

On a recent trip to the National Museum of African American History and Culture, a quotation jumped out at me. It was in the context of captured Africans singing mournfully as they were transported in the holds of slave ships: “Their singing was always in tears, in so much that one captain threatened one of the women with a flogging because the mournfulness of her song was too painful for his feelings.” It struck me that the church often has a similar posture toward those expressing lamentation today: please do not make me feel your pain, it hurts my feelings. As

the slave ship captain well knew, it is especially difficult to face pain that one is complicit in causing. Lamentations demand that we examine our own complicities and ask: Whose feelings matter?

The stories of the #MeToo movement are not new. What's new is the response. For perhaps the first time in history, women's voices are being heard and powerful men who have harassed and abused are being held to account. The church can use this cultural moment to address abuse and speak difficult truths, drawing on the resources of our scripture.

After I wrote my memoir about being raped, I became the repository of other people's stories of abuse. These stories may not bear my name, but I hold them in my heart as part of my vocation. To do this without losing heart, I need to ground myself in scripture. I need to return to the well of the Christian story and to do so amid the body of Christ.

As Christians we share many painful stories—the painful stories of our lives and the painful stories of scripture. When we faithfully wrestle with both kinds of stories in the context of the body of Christ, we become conduits of good news, no matter how imperfect our preaching or exegesis may be. Believing in Jesus is not a matter of assenting to certain doctrinal truths but of trusting the One who tells us that the truth will set us free.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The Bible's #MeToo stories."