

Community-Developed

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Lament Over Sexual Violence

A Readers' Theatre

Judges 19, 2 Samuel 11, 2 Samuel 13

5 readers are sitting at the front on stools, with mics and music stands in front of them. They are each wearing a piece of fabric (as a shawl, scarf, bandana, etc.). In front of them is a table/altar with 6 candles on it. Only the centre candle is lit. At the base of the candles are strips of torn cloth (enough for everyone in the congregation to have one). Reader's 1, 2, 3 and 5 are female while reader 4 is male.

Spread throughout the congregation are six additional readers. Reader's 6-8 are female, while readers 9-11 can be male or female, though it would be preferable for one or two of them to be male.

1: My God,

2: My God,

3: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night but find no rest." (*Psalm 22:1-2*)

1: "My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me." (*Psalm 55:4-5*)

2: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?” (*Psalms 13:1-2a*)

(Pause.)

2: I am Bathsheba.

3: I am Tamar.

1: I am the Levite’s concubine. My name is not important. Or so it seems.

I lived in Ephraim with my husband. But I became angry. Angry at my husband. Angry at a system that treated me like property. Angry at a system that stripped me of my choices and my power. So I left and went to my father’s house in Bethlehem in Judah. I was there for four months.

Then my husband came to get me and bring me back home. He was actually quite sweet about it. Really, my husband was a good guy. But that doesn’t excuse what happened later...My husband stayed at my father’s home for five days, eating and drinking and on the evening of the fifth day, we set off for Ephraim. The servant suggested we stop for night in Jebus, but my husband said ‘no.’ He didn’t want to stop in a city of foreigners, with all the risk that entailed. So we continued on to the Gibeah, so that we could spend the night among Israelites. As was the practice, we waited in the town square for an invitation, but for a long time no one invited us in for the night. I guess that should have been a warning. But eventually, an old man, coming in from his work in his fields, invited us to his home, to be his guests for the night.

Later that evening, some men of the city surrounded the house and demanded that our host bring out my husband. They wanted to rape him. The mob was loud and wild. It was terrifying.

The old man wanted to protect my husband and so he offered me and his daughter – his virgin daughter, but that’s hardly the point – for the men to rape and abuse as they liked. The men outside wouldn’t listen and so my husband threw me outside to the men. And then I was raped... I was filled with terror and shame and intense pain as I was torn apart inside. That night I was raped so many times and with such violence that I was unconscious, nearly dead, and then dead. At the end of the night they discarded my body on the doorstep of our host. Sex was a murder weapon. Death was a relief.

5: I don’t think I’ve ever heard your story. Not in Sunday school. Not in a sermon...

4: Well, it’s a pretty disturbing story. It’s hard to listen to.

5: But sexual violence happens. It’s there even if we try to ignore it. It’s In Bible stories. In our churches. In our families.

(1 tears her fabric and lays both pieces over her music stand.)

2: I am Bathsheba.

5: Oh, this story I've heard before. Not in Sunday school, but maybe it was in a sermon... or was it a book...

2: You've likely heard my story. It's told as a story of adultery and murder. It's told as a story of wrongdoing and repentance. It's told as the story of the great King David. Sometimes it's even told as a story of seduction. But this is also my story and it is a story of sexual violence.

I was married to Uriah, the Hittite, and he was away fighting in David's army. Whether he was a good man or not and whether I was satisfied in the marriage – or not – that's irrelevant for this story. My period has just ended and so I bathed and purified myself according to the customs and regulations of our people. Shortly afterward, there was a messenger at my door, informing me that the king wanted to see me. This seemed bizarre, but I knew it wasn't a request. When the king calls, you go. So I went. I'd never met the king before. He was handsome and charming, just like they everyone said he was. And confidence is attractive. I don't deny that I was flattered and sort of intrigued. But I was also nervous and uncomfortable, especially when I saw how he was looking at me. He told me that I was beautiful, that he'd never felt like this before, that I was irresistible. He touched me and told me he couldn't help himself and then....and then...and then he raped me.

5: Rape? That's a pretty strong word.

2: *(Hesitant)* Yeah. I know. And I know, I didn't scream, I didn't kick him or fight back. And I know, there was part of me that responded to him physically. And, because I was beautiful, people say I seduced David with my beauty, with my body. They make it sound like it was my fault, like David had no choice. You know, "boys with be boys" and all that. People say this was sex, or seduction, or a love affair.

But that's not right. This was not my fault. I had no choice here and no power. David could have easily overpowered me. But he also had the power of shame, the power of banishment, the power of imprisonment, even the power of execution to use if he wanted. How could I say 'no'? How could I fight him off?

But now I want to speak up. I want to tell my story. I want you to know that this is not what I wanted and that it is not my fault.

5: David may have a bit self-absorbed and thoughtless, but he wasn't a cruel man. He was a good king. I'm sure he didn't mean to hurt you.

2: But I was hurt. And ashamed. And pregnant. The consequences were unthinkable. This wasn't my fault, but I felt like it was. And since Uriah had been away for so long, this pregnancy meant that I couldn't keep what had happened a secret. Everyone would say that I had committed adultery and that this was my fault. And then what would happen? Exile? Execution? In a panic, I sent a message to the king to let him know that I was pregnant. I'm not sure what I hoped would happen, but I was desperate.

What happened was that David summoned Uriah back from battle and casually suggested he stop at home to see his wife; wink, wink, nudge, nudge. But Uriah didn't come home – he felt that he shouldn't be having fun while the rest of his unit was still deployed. I don't know how I could have faced him if he did come home, how I could have had sex with him like everything was normal. I felt so dirty and ashamed and...damaged.

After a couple more failed attempts to send Uriah home to have sex with me, David contrived to have Uriah killed in battle. I suppose I should just be grateful that he didn't contrive to have *me* killed...

After the mourning period was over, David sent for me again, this time to be his wife. Can you imagine? I know, I know, David was a great king, a handsome man, a good singer... people kept telling me how lucky was to be the wife of a king. But after what he had done to me and to Uriah...now I had to face him, day after day, night after night. I could never get over the way he had looked at me that first time or the deep feelings of shame and powerlessness when he touched me.

And the child? I loved that child. He was beautiful and innocent and mine. But my love for him was mixed with all the fear and shame that accompanied his conception. It was an impossible situation.

(2 tears her fabric and lays both pieces over her music stand.)

- 3: I am Tamar. I am David's daughter. My half-brother, Amnon was David's first-born son and he was entitled, arrogant, and used to getting what he wanted...and what he thought he wanted was me. He called it love, but that's not what it was.

On the advice of one of his buddies, Amnon concocted a scheme to get what he wanted. He pretended to be ill. When David, the king, our father, asked him what might make him feel better, Amnon asked him to send me over to cook for him. Dad never said 'no' to Amnon, so he sent me over. Amnon and I weren't close and I didn't particularly like him, but I went. At first, Amnon refused to eat the cakes I made. Then he sent everyone else away and told me to bring the food to him and hand-feed him. When I got to his beside he told me that he wanted to have sex with me. I was shocked and confused. I tried to get away. I told him 'no'. This was not what I wanted. I tried to stay calm and remind him of why this was such a vile idea. I even told him that he should ask Dad to marry me - I was that desperate to get out of there. But he grabbed me, held me down and forced himself on me.

After he raped me, his lust turned to revulsion. He yelled at me to "Get out!" But that put me in an even worse position. I knew how things worked. Even though this was rape, I would be considered "ruined." The only way I could avoid shame, humiliation and rejection was to convince Amnon to marry me. Even though he was my brother. Even though he had just raped me. I wanted nothing more than to get away from him. But I was equally terrified of what the rest of my life would be like if I left. I begged him for help, for mercy after what he did, but he had me thrown out.

When Absalom, who is my full brother and David's third son, found out what happened, he told me to be quiet and not to take it to heart because Amnon was my brother. Can you believe it? The fact that *my brother* was the one who raped me wasn't a comfort. I think

Absalom was just trying to keep things from getting worse and we both knew how complicated our family dynamics were, but the silence made it worse. And Dad, when he found out, he did nothing. He was angry for a while, but not enough to do anything about it.

(3 tears her fabric and lays both pieces over her music stand.)

5: These stories are so hard to hear. I don't know what to do.

4: I feel sick. I feel angry. I feel powerless. I don't know what to say.

1: Tell me that you're glad that I told you my story. Even if it's hard for you. Even if it's hard for me.

2: Tell me that you believe me and that this is not my fault.

3. Share in my grief and my sorrow. Join in my lament.

2: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night but find no rest." (Psalm 22:1-2)

3: "My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me." (Psalm 55:4-5)

1: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?" ((Psalm 13:1-2a)

(Pause.)

5: I am Jyoti Singh Pandey. In 2012, while riding on a bus in New Delhi with a friend, I was beaten, gang-raped and then thrown off the bus. I died from my injuries.

4: I am a teenager. My

2: father

1: uncle

3: cousin

5: brother sexually abused me for years. I tried to tell my

1: teacher

2: sister

3: father

- 4: mother what was happening, but she didn't believe me. I thought it was my fault. I thought there was something wrong with me.
- 5: I am an 18 year-old woman. I was walking in Osborne Village late one evening last month and a man grabbed me, pulled me into a dark corner and sexually assaulted me.
- 4: I am a high school student at St. Michael's College School. I was pinned down by a group of students. They sexually assaulted me with a broom handle.
- 5: I am part of the
- 1: Catholic
- 3: Anglican
- 2: United
- 5: Mennonite church. I never told anyone – I was too scared and ashamed – but I was sexually abused by my
- 3: priest
- 2: pastor
- 1: Sunday school teacher
- 5: mentor. Though the abuse only lasted for a few months, it damaged my romantic relationships, my relationship with my family and my relationship with the church and with God for decades.
- 6: I am your sister.
- 7: I am your partner.
- 8: I am your mother.
- 9: I sit next to you in class.
- 10: in church
- 11: on the bus.

(5 tears her fabric and lays both pieces over her music stand.)

- 2: These stories are so hard to hear. And there are so many of them.
- 1: I don't know what to do.
- 3: I don't know what to say.

- 5: Tell me that you believe me and that this is not my fault.
- 4: Share in my grief and my sorrow. Join in my lament.
- 5: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night but find no rest.” (Psalm 22:1-2)
- 4: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?” (Psalm 13:1-2a)

(Pause.)

- 3: I've never been assaulted or abused. But I'm always alert when I'm out walking, especially at night, especially alone. I'm always aware of who is around me and how they're behaving. Instead of relaxing into the beauty of the night, part of my mind must always be planning – if someone comes after me, what can I do? Where can I go? What should I yell?
- 2: Last weekend, at a party, my friend came up to me, all freaked out. Some guy wanted to hook up with her, but she told him she wasn't interested. He didn't take her seriously and she had to fight him off. She wasn't hurt and he didn't really *do* anything. Besides, that kind of thing happens all the time. So I kind of shrugged it off and told her to come dance with me.
- 4: What have I taught my sons? What have they learned? What have they done?
- 5: I've started really listening to song lyrics when I listen to the radio. For years, I've just been singing along without realizing how often I'm singing out words that reinforce the attitudes and structures that create space for objectification, sexualization and violence.
- 3: As I child, I was abused by one of my teachers. I didn't feel like I could tell anyone what the teacher was doing to me. I was ashamed. *(pause)* And now, when I've done the same thing to one of my students, the shame is so much worse and the silence is so much harder to break.
- 4: I was drunk. She was drunk. I thought I had consent. I didn't know. I didn't understand.
- 1: My daughters should be free to wear whatever they want. Their bodies are strong and beautiful in ways that have nothing to do with princesses or with sex. They shouldn't have to hide them or cover up to be safe. What do I tell my daughters?
- 2: He was drunk. I was drunk. I thought it was my fault. I didn't know. I didn't understand.

(4 tears his fabric and lays both pieces over his music stand.)

- 5: My God,
- 4: My God, what have we done?

- 3: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night but find no rest.” (Psalm 22:1-2)
- 1: “My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.” (Psalm 55:4-5)
- 2: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?” (Psalm 13:1-2a)

Congregational Lament and Response

The congregation is invited to join in the lament by singing Lord, have mercy. Anyone who wants to is invited to come up to the front to take a strip of torn fabric.

3: O God,

1: My God,

(5 takes one piece of her fabric and lays it on the altar and lights one of the candles while the reading continues. Then 4 does the same.)

2: “In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me.” (Psalm 31:1)

1: Telling my story to the police, and in court, was hard. It was like living the experience again. I felt shame, fear and judgement.

(Following 4, 1 takes one of her pieces of fabric up to the altar and lights a candle.)

3: Telling my story here today was hard, too, but it was different. This time I was telling the story in my own time, on my own terms.

2: This time there was compassion and understanding. My pain and my sorrow have been shared. I don't feel quite so alone.

(Wait for 4 and 1 to come back to their stools.)

5: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” (Psalm 51:1)

(3 lays one piece of her fabric on the altar and lights a candle while the reading continues. Then 2 does the same.)

4: I can see that my actions were wrong and hurtful. But I also see that I can ask for help, that I can change. I can be forgiven.

1: "The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. And those who know your name put their trust in you. For you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you." (*Psalm 9:9-10*)

(Wait for 3 and 2 to come back to their stools.)

2: The problem of sexual violence affects all of us.

3: And the possibility of preventing and healing the wounds of sexual violence belongs to us all.

5: There are no easy answers. There are no quick fixes.

4: But there is hope. Because we worship a God of healing and a God of forgiveness.

1: Because we have been called, as God's people, to share one another's sorrow,

2: to seek justice

3: and offer forgiveness.

4: We are called to pursue shalom

5: and to share God's immeasurable love.

1, 2, 3, 4, and 5: Amen.