

Do you ever find yourself in a challenging spot? Do you ever find yourself lost?

Once, Rev. Billy Graham was lost. It was early in his ministry, he arrived in a small town to preach a sermon. Wanting to mail a letter, he asked a young boy where the post office was. When the boy told him, Dr. Graham thanked him and said, "If you'll come to the church this evening, you can hear me telling everyone how to get to heaven."

"I don't think I'll be there," the boy said.

"Why not?" Rev. Graham asked.

The little boy replied, "How are you going to tell me how to get to heaven, you don't even know your way to the post office."

Today, we live in a world where people are lost. We sometimes feel lost. The paths we find ourselves on, the solutions we are trying can leave us feeling empty, alone, scared and tired. We know something isn't right, but it is hard to put a finger on it. Has that feeling ever been yours? Have you ever felt lost? Have you ever found yourself in a challenging spot?

Our scripture for today is for anyone who has ever felt lost. It is for anyone who has ever felt like something is wrong. It is for anyone who has ever felt cheated.

This scripture is an odd scripture from the Old Testament about Tamar, a woman who acted with courage. It is a strange scripture, because it talks about outdated customs and practices that most of us would find mildly offensive, to say the least. You might even be wondering, "Scott, why on earth did you read that scripture in worship today?" And that is a great question.

Today, we are beginning a sermon series that is going to last right through Christmas Eve morning. For the next five weeks, we are going to look at women from the Bible who are models of faith. We are doing this as a way to celebrate that fifty years ago, the United Methodist Church stepped out in leadership among Christian Denominations and granted full clergy rights to women. It was a huge, momentous occasion. Today, most of us take it for granted that God calls both men and women to Ordained Ministry. I grew up seeing women preach. I grew up seeing women in leadership as District Superintendents in the church. I was even there, in 1980, when the first woman was elected Bishop in the United Methodist Church. Bishop Marjorie Matthews served right here in Wisconsin. Yet it is hard for me to believe that there are still denominations in our world today who don't allow women in leadership.

About a year ago, one of our daughters was here in church, with her boyfriend. Rev. Susan was preaching. She did her usual terrific job. After service, while eating lunch at our house, the boyfriend said, "That is the first time I heard a woman preach. I was blown away."

So we are going to celebrate 50 years of full clergy rights for women in our denomination by looking at five women. These are women related to the Christmas story. The first three are mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus; Tamar, Ruth, and Bathsheba. They are recognized for their courage, daring and faith. Then we are going to turn to Elizabeth and Mary. Some of you may be surprised that these stories are in the Bible. But they are.

In our scripture for today, Tamar has been married to Judah's oldest son. Unfortunately, he dies. As was the custom of that day, his brother was supposed to marry Tamar and raise a child for his brother. But he refuses to actually help her become pregnant. Then he dies.

As the story goes, Judah has one more son, but he was not old enough to fulfill this custom. So Judah sends Tamar back to her father's home to wait for Shelah to come of age.

In that world, Tamar was in a tough spot. She was seen as damaged goods. She had been married not once but twice with no children. In that world, where having children was everything for a woman; life was going to be pretty hard for her. She was in a tough spot, with no way out, because she understood that Judah was afraid that his last son would die like the others. He was blaming Tamar for their deaths. Have you ever been unfairly blamed for something?

Judah held the key to her future. But he wasn't willing to help out. Tamar was in a tough spot. Have you ever been in a tough spot? Have you ever felt cheated? What did you do? Where did you turn?

I believe this scripture is in our Bible, and Tamar is remembered today, *because she found a way, in the midst of her difficulties, to turn to God and be creative in dealing with her embarrassment.*

She changed clothes and disguised herself. She took matters into her own hands and placed herself in a position that she would be noticed and selected by Judah. In a few months, when it became clear that she was pregnant, and word got out. Judah wanted her brought out and destroyed in front of everyone.

When she came out, she revealed who the father of the child within her really was, and Judah knew she was in the right. Judah knew she had acted much more faithfully than he did. Tamar is remembered in our Holy Scriptures, because she was a woman of courage and faith, willing to act so that God could be glorified. Are you willing to be a person of courage and faith? Are you willing to act so that God can be glorified?

If so, it may mean stepping out in faith and courage. But we can do it.

A while back, there was a guest who checked out of the Polynesian Village resort at Walt Disney World. She was asked how she enjoyed her visit. She told the front-desk clerk that she had a wonderful vacation, but was heartbroken about losing several rolls of film that she had not yet developed. She was particularly upset over the loss of the pictures she had shot at the Polynesian Luau, because that was a memory that she particularly treasured.

The hostess at the front desk understood Disney's philosophy of caring for their guests. So she asked the woman to leave her a couple rolls of fresh film, promising she would take care of the rest.

Two weeks later, this guest received a package at her home. In it were photos of the entire cast of the luau show, personally autographed by each performer. There were also photos of the parade and fireworks in the theme park, taken by the front desk hostess on her own time, after work. Later the guest wrote a letter. She said she had never in her life received such compassionate service from any business establishment.

This hostess exemplified stepping out with courage. She went above and beyond what was expected. And it made a difference.

Tamar also stepped out with courage. And it made a difference for God too. Her story, gives us the courage, if we are ever in a tight spot, to turn to God and step out in faith and courage as well. In so doing, we can make a difference for God as well.

May God teach us to be faithful.

Amen.