

I'm going to begin my sermon this morning with a group challenge; we're going to engage in a congregation-wide staring contest. There's really only two rules: (1) When I say "go," you need to open your eye-lids as wide as you can; and (2) If you blink, you're out. You can choose to stare at the person seated next to you or you can focus your stare on a spot of your choosing in the sanctuary. *Are you ready? Go.*

Do you ever wonder who decided that "staring" should be made into a contest? *I'm not very good at spelling or math, sports don't interest me, but I'm really good at staring.* It's all a bit strange...it's not polite to stare—we all know that—but more, staring quickly becomes painful.

About 10 seconds in we begin to feel it—a slight burning in the eyes that tells us something is wrong. At 25 seconds the pain becomes more intense. At 40 seconds, we begin to think, "*This is dumb. Why am I doing this to myself?*"

At this time I want to invite you to close your eyes and keep them closed for a few moments. It feels better doesn't it? Much better. The pain goes away, your eyes begin to feel better again, and the memory of what you endured is quickly forgotten. Let me invite you to open your eyes.

I gave the option of focusing your eyes at a point in the sanctuary but a true staring contest always involves another person. A part of what makes a staring contest uncomfortable is the fact that you lock eyes with another person for a lengthy period of time. A staring contest requires both a close proximity and an intensity of gaze that feels awkward and unnerving, even if we're staring at someone we know and love. In order to win, we have to force ourself to keep staring but there's something in all of us that wants to look away.

And sadly, this desire to look away isn't limited to staring contests; in presence of pain, injustice, or abuse, the desire to look away is overwhelming. When we don't know what to say or do, when we are frightened, or feel powerless, we tend to look away. *Someone else will say something, do something...someone more qualified or credible than me.*

The failure to act—to say or do *something, anything*—can be just as destructive as saying or doing the wrong thing. At times, the failure to act makes us complicit in the wrongs being done to others.

illus: On the screen behind me, I have pictures of some of the most important women in my life; each one is a part of my extended family. A grandmother, a mother, a mother-in-law, a wife, a sister-in-law, cousins, a daughter, and a niece.

Canadian stats reveal that 70% of people who experience family violence are women and girls.¹ And according to Government of Canada stats, taken from 2008, women are 10 times more likely than men to be the victim of sexual assault.² Sexual assault is the only violent crime in Canada that is not declining.³ According to a national survey conducted in the United States, 81% of women say they have experienced some form of sexual harassment or assault.⁴

81%—that's a shocking number. According to these stats, at least 7 of these 9 female family members have experienced, or will experience, sexual harassment or sexual assault.

The title of my sermon this morning is "*Don't Look Away*," and it's connected to the Biblical text we're going to look at this morning—2 Samuel 13-19. In these chapters we hear the tragic story of Tamar being sexually abused by her half-brother, of her father David looking away and refusing to act, resulting in Tamar's brother—Absalom—enacting revenge.

It would be a lot easier to talk about something else, it is Mother's Day after all. *Isn't this a day to be sentimental, to talk about happier things?* Perhaps. When I mapped out this preaching series last June, ironically, this text fell on this date. And it's because of the important women in my life, and the important women in your life, that we

cannot look away or ignore the destructive power of sexual assault; it affects us all.

In just a moment I'm going to read from 2 Samuel 13, but before I do, I want to mention that I am deeply indebted to Pastor Mardi's thinking, writing, and speaking on this subject. Throughout this message I am going to be quoting directly from a recent sermon that she preached at the Regent Pastor's Conference.

If you have a Bible with you, please turn with me to 2 Samuel 13; if you are using the Blue Bible from the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page 249.

Vs. 1-2, "*In the course of time, Amnon son of David fell in love with Tamar, the beautiful sister of Absalom son of David. 2 Amnon became so obsessed with his sister Tamar that he made himself ill. She was a virgin, and it seemed impossible for him to do anything to her.*"

Allow me to briefly explain the family tree. Amnon is David's firstborn son, born of Ahinoam—David's second wife. Absalom was David's third born son, born of Maakah—David's third wife; Tamar and Absalom had the same mother. As the firstborn, Amnon was heir

¹ <https://www.canadianwomen.org/the-facts/gender-based-violence/>

² <https://www.canadianwomen.org/the-facts/gender-based-violence/>

³ <https://www.canadianwomen.org/the-facts/sexual-assault-harassment/#easy-footnote-bottom-9-109>

⁴ <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/2/21/17036438/sexual-harassment-me-too-assault-hollywood>

apparent to the throne but if anything happened to Amnon, Absalom was next in line.

Notice the language used to describe Amnon's feelings towards Tamar: obsessed to the point of illness, unable to "do anything *to* her." Not, unable to do anything *with* her, or *for* her, but unable to do anything *to* her.⁵ What's being described here is not love; it's objectification, it's lust, it's possessive and destructive.

One day, Amnon's cousin (Jonadab) noticed that Amnon looked unwell, and Amnon confided that it was his unrequited love for Tamar. The two of them came up with a plan that would allow Amnon some alone time with Tamar; Amnon pretended to be ill and asked his father David to send Tamar to bring him some comfort food. Dutifully, Tamar prepared a meal for Amnon but when she presented it to him he refused to eat it and demanded that everyone in attendance leave his presence save her.

Now reading from verse 10, "*Tamar took the bread she had prepared and brought it to her brother Amnon in his bedroom. 11 But when she took it to him to eat, he grabbed her and said, 'Come to bed with me, my sister.' 12 'No, my brother!' she said to him. 'Don't force me! Such a thing should not be done in Israel! Don't do this wicked thing. 13 What about me? Where could I get rid of my disgrace? And what about you? You would be like one of the wicked fools in Israel. Please speak to the king; he will not keep me from being married to*

you.' 14 But he refused to listen to her, and since he was stronger than she, he raped her."

Tamar said "No!" She reasoned with her half-brother—*this is wrong, this will disgrace me, you will be reviled.* She even suggested that their father David would approve of a marriage between them if Amnon would but ask. Tamar knew better, such a union was considered incest according to biblical law; David would not approve this union, but Tamar was desperate, buying time, trying to get away.⁶ Amnon refused to listen; he seized her and raped her.

Vs. 15-17, "*15 Then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her. Amnon said to her, 'Get up and get out!' 16 'No!' she said to him. 'Sending me away would be a greater wrong than what you have already done to me.' But he refused to listen to her. 17 He called his personal servant and said, 'Get this woman out of my sight and bolt the door after her.'*

Now quoting Mardi, "Four times the text describes Amnon's new feelings towards Tamar. Love has been replaced by hate...the hatred with which he hates her is greater than the love with which he loved her. Amnon is judged by his own words, 'Put this woman out of my presence and bolt the door after her.' This is a graphic description of the damage done to both offender and offended. Amnon's heart has become twisted...His relationship with his sister is destroyed: the sin of the oppressor and the shame of the oppressed. Before the rape, he

⁵ Mardi Dolfo-Smith, "Don't Look Away: Prophetic Lament Over Objectification," Regent Pastor's Conference, 2019.

⁶ Paul S. Evans, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: 1-2 Samuel*, 413.

calls her “my sister” after the rape calls her “this woman”.⁷

Vs. 18, “[Tamar] was wearing an ornate robe, for this was the kind of garment the virgin daughters of the king wore. 19 Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the ornate robe she was wearing. She put her hands on her head and went away, weeping aloud as she went.”

Again quoting Mardi, “This is Lament. The tearing of clothes, the wearing of ashes and sobbing that draws attention to the shame, the violation, the destruction that Amnon has perpetrated. **Don't look away!** See what has been done to me. This is a prophetic act, crying aloud in times of injustice. Everyone must see and hear. Even though Amnon would not listen, Tamar will be heard. Look at what has been done to me, see my tears, and join with me in my cries.”

But all too often we do look away; we are uncomfortable with people's pain. When we don't know what to do or say, we tend to do nothing, to say nothing. We look away, we pretend it didn't happen; we hope it—the perpetrator, the victim, the consequences—will simply go away. We sweep things under the carpet, we change the subject but it doesn't work—it never has and it never will.

Vs. 20, “Her brother Absalom said to her, 'Has that Amnon, your brother, been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother. Don't take this thing to heart.' And Tamar lived in her brother Absalom's house, a desolate woman.”

⁷ Mardi Dolfo-Smith, Regent Pastor's Conference, 2019.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Joe Berkowitz, <https://www.fastcompany.com/40489989/heres-the-ever-growing-list-of-men-accused-of-sexual-harassment-since-weinstein>

Absalom can't fix Tamar's pain; no matter what he says or does, the terrible reality remains. This ancient story speaks with such power because it could have been written last week; the more things change the more they stay the same. Mardi writes, “Millions of women continue to lament and to live lives that are desolate because of the abuse of masculine power.”⁸

No doubt you are aware of the global social media phenomenon known as #MeToo. In an article for Fast Company, Joe Berkowitz writes, “There's nothing new about powerful men being accused of sexual harassment... The unfamiliar part is that there are starting to be actual consequences. These men are losing their jobs, being banned from future opportunities, and in some cases, legal action will almost certainly be forthcoming.”⁹ Senators and businessmen, actors and writers, professors and pastors have all been implicated.

Don't look away.

Vs. 21 “When King David heard all this, he was furious. 22 And Absalom never said a word to Amnon, either good or bad; he hated Amnon because he had disgraced his sister Tamar.”

To this point in our series through 1&2 Samuel, we have talked about David the shepherd, the warrior, the fugitive, the friend, the worshipper, the adulterer, and the king; now we come to David the father. Sexual abuse, perpetrated within his own family, between his

children—David was furious. But in spite of his fury, David did, and said, nothing.

The injustice done to his daughter elicited an emotional response from David, but no action. He was angry, and, he looked the other way. *Why didn't he act?* At times our own woundedness has a way of getting in the way. Previously David had abused Bathsheba, forcing himself on this married woman. When Bathsheba became pregnant, David committed to a series of actions that ultimately led to the murder of her husband.

I suspect that when David heard about his son's sexual abuse, he looked away because of his own shame. David wasn't any better than his son; he had no moral ground upon which to stand. David said nothing, did nothing, and in so doing, became complicit in Amnon's abuse.

There is a destructive power at work in silence. In the absence of words spoken or actions taken, things get worse, not better. 2 Samuel 13:23 tells us that while David looked the other way, Absalom—Tamar's brother—bided his time, plotted against Amnon, and two years later, had him killed.

After the murder of Amnon, Absalom fled into self-imposed exile for the next three years. At the end of the three years, David permitted Absalom to return to Israel, but he refused to see his son for the next two years. Again, silence and inaction; this silence fuelled the enmity between father and son.

Absalom hadn't forgotten what Amnon did to his sister; he hadn't forgotten his father's paralysis in the face of this abuse. Chapters

15-19 chronicle a further disintegration in David's family. After David pardoned Absalom, Absalom plotted revenge against his father, seized the throne, and attempted to kill David. David ran away, went into hiding, and in the end Absalom was killed and the kingdom was restored to David.

It's heartbreaking, horrible, and preventable. The failure to act—to say or do *something, anything*—can be just as destructive as saying or doing the wrong thing. In the face of abuse, we can all say and do something.

In a short while we are going to gather around the Lord's Table to remember and celebrate the victory that Jesus won for us on the cross. His was a victory won against evil, sin, and death. And while we are right to focus on the Cross, we perhaps overlook His prophetic words and action against the abuse of power during His ministry.

Much of his teaching and healing took place among the poor and oppressed. He regularly spoke out against those who used power to intimidate, oppress, and seek their own advantage. Jesus made it clear that from God's perspective, power is meant to be used in the service of others. In Mark 10:45 Jesus said, "*For even the Son of Man—[Jesus' name for Himself]—did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.*"

Do you remember the time when Jesus walked into the Temple, and saw money-lenders and vendors ripping worshippers off? We're told that Jesus made a whip out of rope and began to drive the abusers

out; He knocked their tables over, spilling money everywhere.¹⁰

At another time, Jesus was at the Temple—teaching—when the religious leaders interrupted Him, thrusting a woman in front of Him who had been caught in the act in adultery. They publicly shamed her and asked Jesus how she should be punished.

There's an important question that must be answered. If this woman had been caught in adultery, and as they say, "*It takes two*," where was the man? Why wasn't he brought forward? Why was the fault being laid entirely at the feet of this woman? This is how abusive power works—there's always a double standard.

But Jesus, this time in gentle way, stood with the woman, asking the accusers to look within their own hearts—*are you so pure that you can stand in judgement over her?* One by one, the woman's accusers walked away until she and Jesus were left. "'*Woman,*' Jesus said, '*where are they? Has no one condemned you?*' '*No one sir,*' she said. '*Then neither do I condemn you,*' Jesus declared. '*Go now and leave your life of sin.*'"¹¹

Again quoting Mardi, Jesus demonstrated "the ways power can be used to heal and bless... Through his life he showed us the value of women; he healed women, taught women, worked with women, and

sent women out to tell others about him. Jesus was a man who throughout his life treated women with respect and dignity."¹²

Dorothy Sayers, author of the Essay, "*Are Women Human?*", notes the following:

"Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man - there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made jokes about them, never treated them either as '*The women, God help us!*' or '*The ladies, God bless them!*'; who rebuked without [pettiness] and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious...nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about woman's nature."¹³

Conclusion: At the heart of the Christian message is the Incarnation: *God the Son became human*. He didn't stand on the sidelines and watch; He acted, He stepped into our world. He isn't part of the

¹⁰ John 2:13-22.

¹¹ Cf. John 8:1-11.

¹² Mardi Dolfo-Smith, Regent Pastor's Conference, 2019.

¹³ Dorothy Sayers "*Are Women Human?*"

problem but He is central to the solution.

God knows firsthand what it's like to suffer loss, to be hurt, misunderstood, and rejected; Jesus experienced the pain we bear. He didn't live a privileged, pain-free, human life; Jesus stepped right into the muck and mire. Our Creator drew near as Redeemer.

Mardi writes, "As followers of Jesus, we recognize that evil is ultimately overcome by God and not by us... Jesus invites those of us who have misused power, who have objectified and exploited others, to come to the cross, to repent of our sin, to take up our cross and follow him; in return he gives freedom—the freedom of grace, forgiveness, and mercy, with an invitation freedom to use power *for* [others] rather than *over* [others]."¹⁴

The Lord's Supper: This morning we come to the Lord's Table profoundly aware that the world, and our experience of it, falls short of God's purposes. God grieves over what's been broken, He laments what's been lost, He weeps over the abuse that we experience, or perpetrate.

But God has acted decisively through Christ to rescue, reconcile, and restore. Isaiah writes, "*Surely He took up our pain and bore our suffering; He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*"¹⁵

¹⁴ Mardi Dolfo-Smith, Regent Pastor's Conference, 2019.

¹⁵ Isaiah 53:4-5.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

Instead of looking away, we look to our Crucified Lord; by faith we cry out for healing, forgiveness, strength, and restoration.

*"The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."*¹⁶

At this time I want to invite those serving the bread and the cup to come forward and take your place; I'd also like to welcome the worship team to come and join me on stage. We will have three stations on the main floor and one/two stations in the balcony. I'm going to ask that you come row by row, beginning with the back row and moving towards the front. As you come, you will be invited to tear off a piece of bread, dip it in the cup, and then eat with gladness.

As you wait for your turn to come and receive, our prayer ministry will be available to pray for you.

Worship

Invitation to Prayer Ministry/Benediction