

THE RED TENT REVISITED

GENESIS 34

The plot twists in this story are brutal. When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region, seizes Dinah and lays with her by force, I am enraged. Then, when Scripture speaks of Schechem's soul being drawn to her, of his love for this woman, I am perplexed.

If I am Simeon or Levi, one of Jacob's sons and Dinah's brother, I am not sure how I would respond to Schechem's violence against Dinah or the fact that he now is my bother-in-law. I understand Simeon and Levi's anger. Rape is rape. Sisters are sisters, and justice must be served.

Is justice ever violent? This question is a legitimate one to ask. This story is not asking if war is ever just but if capital punishment is, and while we know the commandment "Thou shalt not kill," the subject is more easily discussed in the abstract than at home, where the person who has been victimized has a face, a name and a history. If somebody asks, "Do you believe in a just murder?" Or perhaps more euphemistically: "Do you believe in capital punishment?" It is much easier to answer "no" than to respond to someone breaking into your home looking to violate one's mother, sister or daughter. What one does instinctively is not always what he or she does intellectually.

If Dinah's story were made it into a full length feature film, would you watch it? If so, how would you watch it? Would you be looking for a five-point sermon or a story that helps you to weather the storms that life brings inevitably? Would you watch while munching on buttered popcorn and slurping Diet Coke? Or would you watch with notebook in hand? Would you watch with your eyes wide open? Or would you watch with your hands over your face and your fingers opened just enough to catch a glimpse of the darkest parts of the story? If you watched, would you feel as if you were doing something wrong, because the pivotal scenes in the story point to subjects that often are ignored or explained away in church and society?

The church often ignores this story. Otherwise, it would not be part of this sermon series. Dinah's story is not told in The Revised Common Lectionary. Jacob's is. Esau's is. Rachel's is. Leah's is. Jacob is Isaac

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and Rebecca's son, the one who tricks his hairier brother Esau out of his birthright. Esau is the one who marries Ishmael's daughter Mahalath. Meaning: Jacob, Esau and Mahalath are all Abraham's grandchildren (although Mahalath's grandmother is Hagar). So, yes, Esau marries his cousin (and you thought that only happened in the Deep South).

Leah is Dinah's mother, and Rachel is her aunt. Jacob is a husband to both of them. He falls for Rachel, whom Scripture calls "the beautiful one," before he falls for Leah, whose eyes are described as "lovely." You probably remember this story (I know that Lydia does; it is why her middle name is "Rachel"). Because Rachel is Laban's younger daughter, Jacob has to wait and work for Laban for seven years before being given a chance to marry her. Then, at the end of seven years, Laban gives him Leah. Sadly, in that place, at that time, the daughter is the father's to give. Laban asks Jacob to wait and work for Rachel for another seven years. Meaning: if your name is Rachel, anybody who is interested in you romantically should be willing to wait 14 years!

God has a sense of humor and a sense of justice, and Scripture leaves it to us to figure out which one leads to Leah being the one who bears Jacob's first children. Leah knows that Jacob loves her sister more than he loves her, and she hopes that everything will change once Jacob has a son. Jacob has six sons by Leah and Leah's maid Zilpah. Then, Jacob and Leah have a daughter Dinah, after which God's sense of humor or sense of justice rears its head again when Jacob and Rachel at last have a son named Joseph, whose amazing Technicolor dreamcoat is the subject of a musical that has been performed by Theatre Tuscaloosa for the past two weeks.

If you wonder what the dynamic between Leah and Rachel would be like or how Zilpah and Leah would feel about each other, allow me to recommend a novel: *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant. First published in 1997, the novel is the story of Dinah and her family told from Dinah's perspective. It, unlike the Scriptures, considers how the women in the story feel and what they might have said. The significant twist in the novel's plot is that Dinah's relationship with Schechem is consensual. When asked why she recasts the

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story in this way, Diamant confesses that she could never reconcile the story of Genesis 34 with a rape, because the prince does not behave as a rapist. She explains that, "After the prince is said to have 'forced' her (a determination made by the brothers, not by Dinah), he falls in love with her, asks his father to get Jacob's permission to marry her, and then agrees to the extraordinary, even grotesque, demand that he and all the men of his community submit to circumcision." Diamant says, furthermore, that she wanted all of the women in her story to be "active agents in their own lives, not passive pawns or victims."

In *The Red Tent*, Diamant establishes Dinah's agency from the first page. The novel begins: "We have been lost to each other for so long. My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust. This is not your fault or mine. The chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men, who had no way of knowing. That is why I became a footnote, my story a brief detour between the well-know history of my father, Jacob, and the celebrated chronicle of Joseph, my brother. On those rare occasions when I was remembered, it was as a victim. Near the beginning of your holy book, there is a passage that seems to say I was raped and continues with the bloody tale of how my honor was avenged. It's a wonder that any mother ever called a daughter Dinah again. But some did. Maybe you guessed that there was more to me than the voiceless cipher in the text." Then, later in the prologue, Dinah laments, "It is terrible how much has been forgotten, which is why, I suppose remembering is a holy thing."

Diamant is Jewish, and within Jewish traditions, remembering is a holy thing. The Shema, which is the prayer that leads into the Great Commandment in Deuteronomy, is about remembering: "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are far away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." Before this, after saying, "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy," God says to Israel through Moses, "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and

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the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and outstretched arm.” Remember that, by God’s grace, you are a survivor. In Jewish tradition, survival is sacred; surviving a tragedy or series of tragic events---like slavery, Holocaust or rape---is holy.

Sometimes I think that Jews have a more intimate relationship with the stories in their Scriptures and tradition than do Christians. I don’t know why I feel this way, but I do. It may have something to do with the Midrash tradition within the Jewish tradition, which invites imagination and creativity into the interpretation of Scripture. Some critics place Diamant in this tradition, though she says that she does not feel that her work belongs there.

This past week, when Lydia and I visited Chet and Suzanne Alexander, we discussed the production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* at Shelton State Community College, which features their granddaughter Ashley. A group of us from UPC went to see it together early in the show’s run, which ends this afternoon, and enjoyed it immensely. Thanks to Adam Miller for making it happen!

While Lydia and I visited Chet and Suzanne, Suzanne reminded me that both *Joseph’s Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* were written by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber and that *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* came first. Of the two, *Jesus Christ Superstar* was more controversial, which may be because the dominant culture is more comfortable taking creative license with the Hebrew Scriptures than with the Greek New Testament. Or maybe it is because the Hebrew Scriptures, with stories like Dinah’s, are offensive enough.

I don’t know. Which version of Dinah’s story is more offensive to you: the Hebrew Scriptures’ or *The Red Tent’s*? Any story of violence against women offends me, and I find any story that ignores violence against women to be equally offensive. Perhaps this story is canonized so that we will be offended and work *against* violence against women and *for* freedom that ensures that every woman’s story is told.

We proclaim that, in Jesus Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, so what do we do when we bump into stories in the Scriptures in which it is impossible to hear what the women

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in them are saying? We listen for the voice of God, in whom there is both Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. We give thanks for the imagination through which the Spirit speaks. We look to a place and to a time in which all boys and girls, men and women, will be free.

Jesus was Jewish. We know that he knew this story, and I wonder what he would say to Dinah. If all that there is to this story is given to us in Genesis, I think that Jesus would speak a word of grace to Dinah and a word of judgment to Shechem, Simeon and Levi. If there is more to this story, as Diamant suggests that there is, I think that Jesus would give thanks that she found love and then say, "Blessed are you who mourn," as they witnessed the actions of her brothers.

I do think that Jesus wants all stories told, especially the stories of those who are persecuted--- women, slaves, Jews and Greeks---because Jesus knows what it feels like to be persecuted. He knows what it feels like to be violated and to let go of this pain for God's sake and for the sake of the world. Often this letting go takes place in the telling of the story, because when a story has been suppressed, when a person has been silenced, remembering is a holy thing. May the telling of Dinah's story empower you to tell yours for the glory of God and to advance Christ's cause in the world! To the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more than we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

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