

Rizpah & Bearing Witness

2 Samuel 21 (The Message)

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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We remain committed, once a month in worship, to read the stories of women in Scripture. Last month, Beth preached on Hagar. Today, we read a story most of you have never heard: the story of Rizpah from 2nd Samuel.

Some background notes so you know what's going on (although I'm sure you are very familiar with 2nd Samuel). It's the story of the rise of David. David is known as the greatest king, the one whom God chose for that role. But David's rise to the throne is... so complicated and morally (oof). David was not the first one to be chosen as king. That was Saul. But, through strange events that will make your head turn if you look at them too long, Saul's blessing is taken away; he can not be king. That sets off enmity and bloodshed between the house of Saul and the house of David. In today's reading, David is consolidating power, he's fending off real or imagined challenges from Saul's heirs. But David is in trouble because famine threatens the stability of his rule. He is desperate to stop it. Here's the story from 2 Samuel 21.

There was a famine in David's time. It went on... three long years. David went to God seeking the reason. God said, "It is because there is blood on Saul and his house, from the time he massacred the Gibeonites." 2 So David called the Gibeonites together... 3 and he addressed them: "What can I do for you? How can I compensate you so that you will bless this land and its people?" 4 The Gibeonites... told the king, "Saul-- the one who tried to get rid of us, who schemed to wipe us off the map--let seven of his sons be handed over to us to be executed--hanged before God at Gibeah, the holy mountain."

David agreed, "I will hand them over to you."

7-9 King David... selected Armoni (Ar-mo-knee) and Mephibosheth (Meh-fi-boh-shet), the two sons that Rizpah daughter of Aiah (Aye-ah) had borne to Saul, and the five sons that Saul's daughter Merav (May-rahv) had borne to Adriel (Ah-dree-el) son of Barzillai (Bar-zil-eye). David turned them over to the Gibeonites who lynched them on the mountain before God--all seven died together....

10 Rizpah daughter of Aiah (Aye-ah) took rough burlap and spread it out for herself on a rock. From the beginning of the harvest until the heavy rains started--six months--she kept the birds away from the dead bodies by day and kept the wild animals away by night.

11-14 David was told what Rizpah had done.... He then went and retrieved the remains of Saul and Jonathan (neither had been properly buried).... He gathered up their remains and brought them together with the bodies of the seven who had just been lynched. The bodies were taken back to the land of Benjamin and given a respectful burial in the tomb of Kish, Saul's father....

From then on God responded to Israel's prayers for the land.

There are so many stories in the Bible we never read. They are hard. There's an argument to be made that we don't come to church to read stories that shock us: the world is enough already. But can it not also be true that seeing our world's exact pain mirrored in the scripture is powerful... and even healing. Rizpah's story is like that.

Who is Rizpah? She is a low-status wife of the disgraced, deceased, King Saul. She is described earlier in Samuel as an object in men's struggles for power. In this passage, we meet Rizpah a second time, and again Rizpah is victimized. Her beloved sons—perhaps the joy of her life, the *only* source of her security—are lynched—hanged—they are the sons of the disgraced king. Rizpah's sons' bodies are dishonored by David and the Gibeonites—against religious requirements—to cause humiliation beyond the torture. Their bodies are left to rot in the sun and be scavenged by animals.

Rizpah has no way to stop it. She has no power to resist the violence done to her and her beloveds. What *can* she do? She does something strange... irrational... desperate... and so loving. She takes her place next to the bodies of the grown boys she once nursed. She lays burlap down on the rocks. And for six months, day and night, she keeps vigil. Six months. Day and night. Weeping, perhaps. Raging. Beating back the birds and the beasts who come—*how dare you!*—to feed themselves on her children's flesh. *You will not touch them!*

Can you imagine? What can we say about Rizpah? Where is God in her story?

For one, her story illustrates a proverb from Africa: “when elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.”

Why do we pay attention to the elephants? When we learn history, we are biased toward “great men.” Saul, David, Solomon. Abraham, Moses, Joshua. The Scripture tempts us into thinking that God works primarily through men in power. It isn't true. God's will, God's way, God's desire, God's insistence that human being choose dignity and loving kindness is not found often or ever in great men... God is not in the elephants. God is in the grass.

The mere fact that our Scriptures kept the stories of Hagar and Hannah and Rizpah and Mary suggests that we People of the Book have always known to look and listen for God in people living in quiet corners of the world. The Scriptures go on about David, but some Scriptures have always preserved at the margin of his story that of Rizpah, weeping, protesting, chastising David, refusing to relinquish her dignity or the honor of her children. No one, she cries, no child of God deserves this. Ever.

The clearest parallel to Rizpah about whom you may know is Mamie Till. In the summer of 1955, Mamie sent her only boy, 14 year-old Emmett, from Chicago to visit relatives in Mississippi. No one can say what happened for sure—it was said Emmett whistled at a white woman. White racists kidnapped this child in the night, beat his body beyond recognition, shot him in the head, tied him to a 75-lb. fan, and sunk him into the Tallahatchie River. Emmet Till's body was recovered and sent back to Chicago for a funeral. His mother, Mamie, looked at him; she saw what they did to her beautiful baby. She did something inconceivable: she insisted at the funeral that her son's casket be open so that people could see what the monsters had done.

Eight years ago, on August 9, 2014, around noon, there was an altercation between a

policeman and another teenager in a suburb of St. Louis. This young man was shot six times by the officer. His body slumped forward. He died face-down in the street.

I don't know how you came to understand what happened to Michael Brown—whether you believe that he was responsible for his own death (people said that for the longest time about Emmett Till). But what is beyond interpretation—what is fact—is that Michael Brown's 18 year-old body lay face down in the street for four hours. No official had the decency or respect to remove his body for four hours in the hot Missouri sun. It was that profound indignity that led me and many others to understand exactly how callous our culture is to black bodies.

It's hard to find on the internet pictures of Michael Brown's body in the street. We censor it. We don't want to admit that happened. That we let him lay there. That his mother stood there powerless to get the police and the coroner to do anything for her son.

Michael Brown's death led people to protest. About police violence. Also that so many communities like Ferguson have been abandoned, their citizens dishonored and dehumanized.

What I want you see in Rizpah's story is that people of faith must grieve and weep and rage and bear witness against the human costs of violence. Violence is part of our world. Sometimes it's random. Much of the time violence is "legitimate," wielded by the state for the sake of controlling people. Emmett Till's murder was state-sponsored violence—the state never tried to bring his murderers to justice; lynching was tacitly endorsed. Michael Brown's murder was state violence—an officer responding with lethal force to a perceived threat. But as we can see with Michael Brown, as we can see with Emmett Till, and as you can see in Rizpah's story—violence goes beyond the violent action itself. It is undergirded by a profound disrespect for human bodies and human beings. David refused to honor his religious obligation; Mississippi refused to enforce its own laws; in America, we abandon communities like Ferguson, MO, and devalue the people who live there. That is violence.

Someone has to bear witness to the human cost of this violence. To sit, like Rizpah, with the victims, and grieve and rage and cry out, "how dare you do this to my child, this child of God!"

What does this look like for us, North Decatur? We've been praying for victims of gun violence for years. What would it look like to bear witness like Rizpah? In Durham, NC, there's an organization called the Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham. It was founded in 1992 as an advocacy group to develop state and local legislation against gun violence. They weren't successful. When the N.C. legislature passed a bill telling municipalities they couldn't regulate guns, the coalition had nothing left to do. One night at a meeting, a woman asked why the coalition—who were all people of faith—didn't hold vigils for the women and men who had been murdered. No one could answer. In all their advocacy, the coalition had never met the people most affected by gun violence. They were humbled. That night, they changed.

Their first vigil was held in 1997. They are held often at the site of homicide. They are holy spaces that acknowledge the dignity and worth of the victim, soothe the traumatic loss, and

consecrate the memory of the victims. The families felt seen. One mother said that she felt relief to know that others cared about her and did not judge her or her son. “The vigil was like a prayer that goes down in your soul,” she said. Another mother said that the vigil for her son was “like a period at the end of a sentence.”

Our world is full of violence. What can you do? Can you stop it? Maybe. Maybe we can bend the unjust systems. But I want you to hear today that there is every bit as much spiritual power in weeping with those who weep. Grief preserves the dignity and the humanity of the one who was lost.

In 2010, a woman visited a museum in Bristol, England. There, behind a glass display case, was a taxidermized animal—a Tasmanian Tiger, which had gone extinct in 1936.

“Here was this beautiful mysterious lost creature locked in a glass case,” she said. “It struck me suddenly as unbearably undignified. And I had this sudden vision of smashing the glass, lifting the body out, carrying the [tiger] out into the fields, stroking its body, speaking to it, washing it with my tears, and burying it by a river so that it could return to the earth.”

This same woman wondered why we have no rituals, no liturgies, no catharsis for the pain of the inconceivable loss of species extinction. Now, every year, on November 30th, people gather to mark the Remembrance Day for Lost Species.

If we can hold on to our grief, if we bear witness, we will not be desensitized, we will keep our humanity.

Six months Rizpah sat there. Six months day and night. I cannot conceive it. I have to believe that somewhere, along the way, others noticed her. That they came and sat with her. Kept her company. Or brought her food or kept watch keeping the birds and the beasts away while she slept.

Finally, David noticed. Finally, the elephant noticed what was happening in the grass.