

2 Samuel 3:7; 21:1-14

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

November 17, 2024

Rizpah Insisted

I don't know about you, but these Old Testament historical narratives can feel like an episode of "Game of Thrones" without the dragons.

They didn't want this story to get out.

On the surface, everything seemed perfect for King David — at least, that's what his court wanted everyone to believe. The focus was always on his successes, not the failures lurking beneath. Not the sexual assault, risking his citizen's lives, arrogance, rape, incest, murder, and the deaths that plagued his royal family. Perhaps we should think twice before labeling any modern politician a "King David" — unless, of course, the shoe fits.

Before I say another word, I'm deeply indebted to Austin Channing Brown for this sermon. She preached the finest sermon I've ever heard on this text at a conference I attended in 2018.

Walter Brueggemann rightly notes the Rizpah narrative as a "jolt to our expectations," but the jolt comes from Rizpah, not David. Her bold love, risk-taking for justice, and challenge to power disrupt the illusion of an untroubled world. She, not the king, is the central figure in this story.

A three-year famine strikes, and like many ancient — and modern — people, the assumption is that someone must be to blame. David's priests and prophets determine that the famine is God's punishment for Saul's "bloodguilt" in breaking a nonaggression pact with the Gibeonites, who had lived peacefully in Israel. Blaming natural disasters on the actions of people you don't like has a long and sordid history.

David asks the Gibeonites, "How can we make this right?" Their response is chilling: "We want seven of Saul's descendants executed." Conveniently, resolving the famine also removes potential threats to David's throne. This is framed as the cost of national security — sacrificing lives, even children's, to maintain power. ***Being drunk with power numbs you to human loss.*** When we think about the separation of migrant families and chants of mass deportation, we see this ancient story isn't all that far from home, is it?

David complies, handing over seven boys — all innocent descendants of Saul — to be impaled and hung on the hill of God. Their only "crime" is belonging to the wrong family, taken from their homes for the supposed good of the nation. Imagine Rizpah, hearing that her two sons would be executed — a devastating but sadly familiar blow for a woman treated as a pawn by the powerful.

Rizpah knows how the men operate, suffering all manner of indignities at their hands, first as a concubine of the former King, Saul, and after his death, a politically motivated raped by his top general trying to secure power.

But she raised her boys. And then they took them. With the death of her boys, she has had enough.

Verse 10: *Then Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth, and spread it on a rock for herself, from the beginning of harvest until rain fell on them from the heavens; she did not allow the birds of the air to come on the bodies by day, or the wild animals by night.*

She will stay there, protecting all seven bodies with her own. She will fight off scavengers, those in the air, and those beasts on the ground, for 6 months. Sleeping, eating, toileting, protecting, and bearing witness. And she is up there on that hill in her red-hot anger, not just for her two boys but all seven. "Every child on a cross is my child!" you can almost hear her shouting.

Day after day, there is Rizpah up on that hill swinging sticks and throwing stones, screaming and staring animals down as she puts her own life at risk day after day and night after night. As she looks at those rotting bodies she remembered their humanity. Those little hands and feet at birth. Consoling them as young children. How they used to laugh. Their first steps. Just like Trayvon's mom remembers his smile. And Mike Brown's mom remembers his laugh. And Breonna Taylor's mom remembers her hopes and dreams. Just like Emmitt Till's mother insisting that the casket be open, insisting his humanity and injustice perpetrated against it, be seen.

Her anger, in the words of Austin Channing Brown, "*points to what is wrong and what could be made right.*" Imagine her up there on that hill. What were people saying about her?

- "She has every right to be mad, but I don't like her tone."
- "That protestor up there scares me."
- "Is she hysterical?"
- "Has she lost her mind?"
- "She's one of those social justice warriors."

- “She’s woke, just another snowflake.”
- “She’s just trying to divide us.”
- “She’s an enemy of the nation.”
- “Doesn’t she know all lives matter?”

Oppressive political policies met with anger are never welcomed, but anger is not destructive; it is INSTRUCTIVE if we will listen. If we will listen to the anger of our siblings in communities of color instead of judging them. If we will listen to our siblings trying to get their families in a safe country. If we will listen to our trans friends who daily hope to survive. If we will listen, we like Rizpah will do more than resist. Rizpah does more than protest. She INSISTS.

She does not see sacrifices for the sake of peace; she sees cold-blooded murder. It is not only indignity and shame heaped upon the boys on the crosses; it is an assault upon the dignity and worthiness of God. She is driven by compassion, and by righteousness, and by justice, and by the fact that she knows she is right, despite her powerlessness.

The actions of this amazing woman somehow bears witness to the true voice of God, and David’s misguided, murderous, and convenient understanding of “the will of God” is changed.

He takes the bodies off the crosses and gives them all a decent burial. So finally they come to rest: Jonathan and Saul and the seven young men.

What must that day have been like for Rizpah. Hearing the chariot wheels coming up the hill. Horses and wheels in the dirt, and commotion. She emerges from her makeshift tent to see what” Stewards of the King to take down the bodies. She had spoken truth to power, and power, finally, concedes.

Well here we are all these many years later. On the other side of Jesus and His impaling on a Roman cross. And the voice of Jesus calls out to us to follow him. To follow him in the tradition of Rizpah who when things were falling apart, Insisted. Who stands in solidarity with the oppressed, who insisted on justice, who took the risk of resistance in public, day and night. And she did this alone. Nobody joined her. Her protest exposes all those who are complicit with their silence.

Rizpah, like Jesus, would speak truth to power. Rizpah, like Jesus, would not settle for the status quo. Rizpah, like Jesus, publicly risked her life on behalf of not only her children but all children everywhere. Rizpah, like Jesus, had no political power. Rizpah, like Jesus, knew her power was in telling the truth by faith. So Jesus followers, you are called to be modern day Rizpahs.

I'll finish the way Austin Channing Brown finished her sermon that day in October of 2018:

I declare you Rizpah, who fight for racial justice. I declare you Rizpah, who fight for the incarcerated. I declare you Rizpah who work for the rights and well-being of queer people of color. I call you Rizpah who refute at every turn the message that the Latino community is to be feared. I call you Rizpah who fight for Indigenous lives. I call you Rizpah who recognize the suffering in the AAPI community and resist model-minority myths. I call you Rizpah who fight against Islamophobia. I call you Rizpah, for you who have the courage to be angry and the love required to pursue justice. To step into lost causes, to speak truth to power. I call you Rizpah.

And today, if your evolving faith means standing before tombs and believing in the possibility of life, I want you to know that you are not alone.

Amen.