

"Remember Rizpah"
2nd Samuel 21:1-14
College Hill Presbyterian Church
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Okay, I know you're thinking it, so let me just say it: this story from 2 Samuel is a terrible story; there's no getting around it. It's certainly not what you expected to hear at the beginning of Orientation. If this text were dramatized as a TV show, it would receive a "Mature Audience" rating for extreme violence. As a movie, it would be rated "R". 2 Sam 21:1-14 is not a biblical passage that gets read/studied or preached very often, if at all, and now that you've heard it, you can see why. It is from the distant past, a culture so different from our world. The books of Samuel reflect a time in Israel's story when life was extremely precarious, when egotistical tyrants ruled with fear, violence was the preferred way to settle disputes, when people tried to explain natural events (like a famine) as signs of God's unhappiness, when wars were waged in the name of God, and human lives traded for protection and political power. On second thought, perhaps these biblical stories are not that different from our world today. Maybe that's why we don't want to read a text like 2 Sam 21:1-14; it hits just a little too close to home. For in confronting this story, we might also have to confront our own injustice, prejudice, and violence.

Yet, there is more to this story than just the brutal revenge carried out by the Gibeonites against some of King Saul's surviving descendants. In the midst of this tragic tale, we find a powerful image of courage, love, and resistance. In the shadows of a story presumably about King David, who, by the way, does not come out looking too good, a minor character, a nobody, should be the focus of our attention. In her, we see an embodiment of the prophet Micah's words of what the HOLY requires of us: to make justice happen, to love passionately as the Divine loves, and to remember that you are Holy's image in the world.

In case you have forgotten who Rizpah is, let me remind you. We first meet her in 2 Samuel 3:7, in a story about the struggle between Saul's descendants over who

would take the throne now that Saul was dead. Rizpah is described as Saul's concubine, but the Hebrew word used indicates that she was actually a legal wife but of secondary status. Here, she is a widow of the deceased king, yet she has no official right to the throne. In this first story about Rizpah, she appears as a pawn in the power games between two of Saul's sons, Ishbaal and Abner. The text seems to indicate that she was raped by Abner in his desperate and unsuccessful attempt to take his father's place on the throne by taking one of his wives. We hear nothing, though, about what became of Rizpah or how she felt about being collateral in a political battle. Abner's crime against her is never punished. Rizpah just disappears from the storyline, until our text from 2 Sam 21, where she is again identified as a widow of Saul and the mother of two of his sons, Armoni and Mephibosheth.

At this point in the story, David is Israel's king, and the land has been suffering a famine for 3 years. David cannot figure out the reason for this natural disaster, so he implored Holy for some answer. The Divine reveals that, when Saul was still king of Israel, he had broken a long-standing covenant of peace between the Israelites and the Gibeonites. Saul had sought to exterminate the entire population, killing many but ultimately failing to meet his goal. With this information, David asks the Gibeonites what they want as an appeasement for this political breach (money, land, what?). The Gibeonites eventually settle on a life-for-life approach, asking David to hand over to them seven of Saul's descendants, so they could execute them. Note that this was not part of the Holy's answer; vengeance is a human approach to settling a dispute. David agrees to their request, and he gives them Saul's five grandsons by his daughter Merab and the two sons born to Saul by Rizpah. Actually, this was a blessing in disguise for David. Allowing the Gibeonites to kill many of Saul's descendants meant fewer possible threats to David's throne. Everyone came out a winner.

Everyone got what they wanted, except, of course, the men who were brutally murdered by the Gibeonites – impaled in plain sight on a mountain and their bodies left exposed to the natural elements and animals. David, feeling confident in his actions and probably enjoying the violent end of his would-be challengers, made no effort to bury the bodies of Saul's murdered descendants. Failure to do this was a grave insult and did

not show proper respect for the dead, but the king was not concerned with doing what was "right/just." To make things worse, the murders took place at the beginning of the barley harvest, which marked a very hot and very dry season in Israel. The intended desecration of the victims' bodies was David's implicit stamp of approval on what the Gibeonites had done.

Up until this point in the story, the action has been dominated by men, but suddenly, a woman takes center stage. In the face of obscene violence and a complete lack of concern for human life, Rizpah, now a grieving mother, is moved to action. As the childless widow of the dead king, Rizpah had no access to King David. She had no authority to stop the executions of her and Merab's sons or to speak out against the desecration of the dead bodies, but that did not mean Rizpah was powerless. Rather, Rizpah decides to protest the injustice of King David through her actions. She goes out to the place where the dead bodies were left and takes up a position from which she can watch over and protect them from the attack of birds and other animals. Day and night, she sat there on sackcloth, a sign of mourning, selflessly protecting the remains of the murder victims. Her vigil lasted until the rains finally fell in Israel, about 5 months. Rizpah took the very personal act of mourning and used it as a prophetic act of resistance to the brutality and inhumanity of the king.

What a vision she must have been, on that rock week after week. When vultures hovered near, she flailed her arms to scatter them. When wild beasts came, she drove them away with rocks and shouts. In the stifling heat of the day and the chilling air of night, Rizpah persisted. Finally, the intended audience for her actions, King David, took note of Rizpah and what she had been doing. The sharp contrast between her actions of faith and dedication and the King's inaction and selfishness moved, or more likely shamed, David to finally do the right thing. He sent his men to give the bodies a proper burial, and even more, David commanded them to do the same for the bones of Saul and Jonathon, which had never been buried. Only when THIS injustice is righted does the famine in the land end.

Unfortunately, our world is not that different from the scenes reflected in the books of 1 & 2 Samuel. It is awash in obscene violence motivated by fear and hate of

the other rather than love of neighbor. Around the world, we watch in horror as wars based on greed destroy lives and starve children of the basics of life. Power-hungry rulers feed their egos and desires for control. In our own country, hard-won rights for all people to claim love and live in honest freedom are eroded each day by maniacal legislators, jurists, and administrators. Gun violence is in the news regularly, often motivated by public figures' spewing hatred and lies. It is overwhelming, too much to bear.

Many of us may feel powerless to make a difference; we ask, "What can one person do?" In these times when we wonder how to respond to the Divine's call in our lives, Let us remember Rizpah. She is a wonderful example of what can be done to effect change by those who seem powerless. Rizpah provides a compelling role model for how to respond to injustice, violence, and hatred. Her story reminds us that we must be willing to take on the responsibility of caring for all Holy's children, we must challenge even the highest of authorities.

In the days to come, when you feel powerless to effect change, remember Rizpah – resist and persist -- be a reminder to the world that life does not have to be this way – It can be different. May our words and our actions reflect the kind of God we worship. Amen.