Proper 24, Yr C Sheila N. McJilton @ St. Columba’s in DC Oct. 23, 2022

Readings: **2 Samuel 21:1-14** Psalm 58:1-5, 9-11 Revelation 6:9-11 Luke 5:43-45

*Love that Sees. Love that Grieves. Love that Protects. Love that Heals.*

If you have never waded through texts from the second book of Samuel, you may be forgiven for shaking your head this morning, for wondering who is who, and who did what to whom, and how do you pronounce these archaic words anyway? More to the point, why bother at all? What does this passage have to do with ***me*** today?

Let’s back up a little. Let’s see if we can get a better sense of this troublesome text and what it might mean for us.

First of all, Rizpah is one of the most tragic figures in the Hebrew scriptures. She is defined by power—and not her own—at least not in the first sense.

King Saul takes her as a concubine, and she gives Saul two sons. Then Saul is killed. Saul’s commander in chief, Abner, wants to marry her. Of course if he were to do this, he would become the official guardian of King Saul and Rizpah’s sons—which would, in turn, give him a substantial amount of power. This does not work well for the others who also crave power.

Before too long, Joab, David’s nephew and commander of his army, decides that Abner is a spy, so he stabs Abner to death.[[1]](#footnote-1) It makes you think of Game of Thrones, right?

In the meantime, David has become King of Israel, and a famine has taken over the land.

Now when the Blame Game kicks in, as it will, things go from bad to worse. It is said that Saul has murdered Gibeonites—whomever they are—and that this is why the famine has come to Israel. It is Saul’s fault. Really? Saul’s been dead for years!

No one knows the real truth. King Saul is long dead, and too often, the winners—or at least the survivors in power—write history books. Now, several generations later, mass violence, love of power, and retribution demand blood for blood, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. That must be why we are having a famine, right?

Oh, and while we’re at it, let’s absolve our own responsibility

by saying that ***God*** said to do this.

Of course the people claiming all this really have a human stake in this biblical game of thrones. Here is what we know. No rain is falling on the crops. Foreigners are involved in the history of this story. No one in power trusts anyone else in power. As King Henry IV says in Shakespeare’s play of that name, “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.” Indeed.

Because Saul is no longer around, King David meets with the heirs of those ill-fated Gibeonites and asks them what he can do. This is, of course, strictly a political move. We might imagine these Gibeonites looking around at each other, shrugging their shoulders, then remembering that Saul has a couple of sons left who could still be a threat to King David’s throne. [Note: They disregard Meribbael, who is crippled, and thus no threat to the throne.]

The two sons of Saul are Rizpah’s sons—and there are also five of Saul’s grandsons from other women. David himself orders the death of all seven of these men—Saul’s remaining line of potential heirs.

The surviving Gibeonites hang Rizpah’s sons, and the five grandsons, on top of a nearby mountain. They basically lynch these innocent men—in fact, scholars believe that there is something like a crucifixion done here—with innocent men left hanging on the very instruments of their deaths.

An impoverished woman named Rizpah, with no status and no power, now takes center stage in this tragedy. Rizpah has lost everything she had. She has lost “her spouse [Saul] and with him

potentially the status that kept her fed, clothed, housed, and safe. . .

Now, in an act of cruelty, David has handed her sons and Saul’s five grandsons over to death in what could only be called an atonement ritual. There was nothing she could do to prevent their deaths

and nothing she could say to David in the aftermath.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Her sons lynched, she is not even allowed to bury her dead in a dignified way. Hung high on crosses, her beloved sons are witness to the world that some people matter a lot more than other people. Mothers may cry out for justice, but too often, those in power stride away, trying to wipe clean their blood-stained souls if not their hands.

There is only one thing Rizpah can do. She can stand vigil over the decaying bodies of her children. She can stand as fierce, silent witness of injustice and unnecessary violence by someone in power.

So she does. In a concrete symbol of defiance—of not allowing her people or her king to ignore this evidence of violence—Rizpah takes sackcloth—a visible sign of grief—and spreads it on the mountain. For an entire season—months—beginning with the start of harvest, she stands guard over the decaying bodies of the two sons to whom she gave birth, the two sons she watched being murdered in cold blood.

Rizpah’s vigil also sends a clear message that the ones who hold power have defied ***God’s*** laws, set out long ago in the book of Deuteronomy—specifically, chapter **21:22-23**: “If someone guilty of a capital offense is put to death and their body is exposed on a pole, you must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight.  Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God’s curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.”

God’s law supercedes the human heart’s capacity for evil, violence, and self-serving power grabs. You might blame God. You might say you prayed and God told you to do this. You might say God’s word said this was okay to do in a special set of circumstances. But in the end, you will not win.

God’s vision, God’s justice, God’s love will prevail. That long arc of justice continues. I know, it might take a long time. A very long time. Ask Medgar Evers’ widow and three children. Ask Emmett Till’s mother. Ask Matthew Shepard’s mother. Ask Ukranian and Russian wives and mothers who may never know where their dead lie in mass graves even today, October 23, 2022.

I believe that we Christians would do well to pay attention

to the words we profess out of our faith—such as the Baptismal Covenant, which is a way of saying the Apostles Creed—that ancient baptismal creed.

We may speak the words easily. But do we really live them out? Do we really “respect the dignity of every human being?” And if we, in our broken human selves, are not able to live out our baptismal promises, then what? Where is the good news?

Here is the good news: the truth is that God loves us, despite our worst selves. God never gives up on us, broken people that we are. God calls us to be witnesses to God’s truths—even if we do that in silent defiance, as Rizpah did all those centuries ago.

This wife could not save the life of her ill-fated husband Saul. This mother had no power to save the lives of her two beloved sons. Yet in her acts of grief and vigilance, in her very, silent being, she finally shamed the one who held power, King David. Despite his orders for unjust murder, supposedly to bring rain, the famine endured.

Finally, someone went to David and told him about Rizpah’s vigil over the bodies of her loved ones. In his heart, David knew he had wronged a lot of people. Finally, he went to find the bones of Saul, the bones of Jonathan—whom David had supposedly loved—and the bones of Rizpah’s sons.

Finally, the dead were buried with dignity. In a very small way, justice was finally served—even if a dignified funeral ritual could never bring sons and husbands back to this side of life. Finally. . .it rained on the land. But not when, or because, these innocent men were murdered.

The famine ended when David attempted to right his wrongs by small acts of justice. True, just, love that comes from God, in God, around God—this love is the kind of love that sees. This is the kind of love that grieves. This is the kind of love that protects. And maybe. . .in God’s good time, this is the kind of love that will heal us all, brothers and sisters together.

Today, look at Rizpah. Re-read Rizpah’s story. Remember Rizpah. And when you think of love,know that an insignificant, defiant woman in the Hebrew scriptures showed us an example of God’s fierce, unrelenting love.

As you remember her on this day in 2022, ask yourself these questions: What kind of love will ***I*** embody today? What kind of love will *I* take out into the world today? Amen.

1. Some info accessed at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/king-david-rise-power-cost-rizpah-tragedy> on Oct. 06, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wilda C. Gafney, “Proper 24 (Closest to October 19)” in *A Women’s Lectionary for the Whole Church: A Multi-Gospel Single-Year Lectionary*, (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2021), 305-306. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)