

A sermon delivered from the preaching series Unraveled
“Rizpah publicly mourns her sons”– by A Sanctified Art
2 Samuel 3:7, 21:1-14
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St. Helens, Oregon

Unraveled by Grief: Rizpah publicly mourns her sons



(The hauntingly beautiful image by Lauren Wright Pittman – A Sanctified Art)

This is the second time I’ve ever preached on this passage. I’d be willing to guess that for most of you, you have never heard a sermon on today’s text. It never shows up in the Revised Common Lectionary. It doesn’t show up in any Sunday school or Vacation Bible School curriculum that I know of. And I think the hymn that Stephen Fearing wrote that we’ll sing in a few minutes is the only known hymn in existence that is based off of today’s text.

And let’s face it, we really shouldn’t be that surprised. It’s a deeply troublesome text that rarely makes it to the pulpit. It’s a dangerous text, one that leaves a visible stain on the often idealized reign of King David.

King David was the second king of Israel. The first was a man by the name of Saul. The Israelites had long wanted a king and God told them several times that they didn’t need one. And yet they begged for one. So God gave them a king named Saul; a name that, in Hebrew, appropriately means “one who has been begged for.” However, as the old cliché goes, be careful what you wish for. The Israelites got a king, but his reign was full of violence and came to a bloody end.

One of Saul’s many mistakes was to mess with the people called the Gibeonites. The Gibeonites were a neighboring group of folks who were not Israelites but enjoyed diplomatic immunity from them because of an ancient oath sworn between the Israelites and the Gibeonites during the time of the Book of Joshua. Basically, in return for chopping wood and collecting water for them, the Israelites promised to not harm the Gibeonites.

King Saul broke this oath and slaughtered many Gibeonites. Now, whether he broke this oath out of foolish ignorance or purposeful malice is unclear. However, the Gibeonites didn't really care; an oath is an oath and the people of that time took oaths very seriously.

Fast forward several years and now there's a new king in town by the name of King David. The early stages of David's reign are troubled by a three-year famine. David goes to God to inquire as to the reason for the famine and God tells him it is because his predecessor, Saul, broke Israel's oath to the Gibeonites in his bloody assault. So, David goes to the Gibeonites and asks what can be done to right the wrong his predecessor did to them.

They think it over for a while and tell David that all that is needed is seven of Saul's sons in order for them to publicly mutilate, execute, and display for all to see. In order to bring the famine to an end and atone for the bloodstain on the royal house of the Kingdom of Israel, David agrees and hands over seven of Saul's sons.

The Gibeonites get on with their bloody task. In the public square, for all to see, they mutilate and dismember the bodies of seven of Saul's sons. Then, as was the practice of the day in order to make a point to any who would think of messing with them, the Gibeonites left the bodies hanging to decompose and feed the birds.

One person in the audience did not cheer with the rest of them. One woman, Rizpah, stayed around after everyone got bored and went back to their homes. You see, two of the bodies that were hanging up for all to see had been her two sons; their names were Armoni and Mephibosheth. Rizpah was one of Saul's many concubines and through her, these were his two sons. Armoni and Mephibosheth had done no wrong to deserve this fate. Even though their bodies were mutilated beyond recognition, Rizpah knew which ones were her sons.

So for many days, she held vigil.

- She publicly mourned the deaths of not only her two sons but for all seven of the men slaughtered to "keep the peace."
- She spread a sackcloth on the ground and, with nothing for shelter, subjects her body to the same conditions as those of her sons as their bodies decompose in the sweltering heat of the sun.

After a while, King David hears of Rizpah's public vigil. You see, it's starting to make headlines. Word of the violence is starting to spread. David is scared that by solving one problem he may have created another. And so, he decides to give Rizpah's sons, and the other five boys, a proper burial in order to bring the situation to a close.

Rizpah's testimony has already been given; thousands of years later, we are still listening to her cry.

After all this time, there are still plenty of Rizpah's among us.

A more current mother in mourning is found in Washington D.C., where there is the National Museum of African American History and Culture, one of the newest additions to the Smithsonian Institution. It is located right around the corner from the White House and next to the Washington Monument. It was first opened in September of 2016.

For me, the most powerful part of the entire museum is the memorial for Emmett Till. Emmett Louis Till was a 14 year old African American boy who was accused whistling at a white woman at a grocery store in Mississippi. In August of 1955, Emmett Till was abducted by several white men and beaten, mutilated beyond recognition, shot in the head, and thrown into a river having had his body weighed down by a fan blade that was tied to his neck with barbed wire. Three days later, his body was found by two boys who were fishing in the Tallahatchie River.

Emmett Till's mother was called by the authorities to come confirm the identity of her son's

body. Her name was Mamie Till Bradley and she witnessed what no parent should ever experience. Her son's face was barely recognizable because of the violence that had been done to him. Because of his mutilated face, many folks strongly encouraged her to have Emmett's funeral be a closed casket affair.

But she refused.

Mamie Till Bradley insisted that her beloved boy's casket be wide open for the visitation and the entirety of the funeral. She insisted that the world witness the violence done to her child. She insisted that it was time that this country spoke the unspeakable and see the unfathomable.

On September 6th, 1955, tens of thousands of people stood in line to pay their respects to Emmett Till and view his mutilated body. Soon photographs of his body were circulated in the press. Most famously, two black publications, *Jet* and *The Chicago Defender*, ran stories of Emmett Till's death and printed the picture of his body in the casket.

The story of Emmett Till's horrific murder spread like wildfire. The picture of his corpse, open for all to see because of Mamie Till Bradley's insistence, galvanized the nation and proved to be a catalyst to ignite the Civil Rights Movement. To this day many consider the Mamie Till Bradley's insistence on having an open casket funeral for Emmett to have been the single-largest event that sparked the Civil Rights Movement. Time magazine, many years later, would go on to select the photograph of Emmett Till's beaten body to be one of the most influential photographs of all time.

In November of 1955, a grand jury declined to indict the two white men who murdered Emmett Till.

Mamie Till Bradley did not allow her son's death to be quietly dusted under the rug. Rizpah didn't either. Both women were mothers who bore public witness to their children's deaths in the hope that no parent would ever again have to feel their pain - the pain of a parent who is helpless to save their child from the senseless violence of this world.

Rizpah's story is an uncomfortable one. It's a story that many of us are tempted to pretend doesn't exist. As I said, you can probably guess why this passage doesn't show up in the lectionary. Most commentaries that I've looked barely give Rizpah a paragraph. To be honest with you, I'm only preaching on this passage today because it's part of the "Unraveled" worship series that comes to us from A Sanctified Art. And yet, the Holy Spirit has gathered us here today to bear witness to Rizpah's anguish and to not let her story be forgotten.

There are Rizpah's all around us. Her cry still echoes around us to this day. Rizpah's cries are the cries of Mamie Till Bradley. Her tears are the tears of parents who have lost children in warfare. Her anguish is the anguish of parents of black boys who are shot in the street by police officers using excessive violence. Her pain is the pain of parents whose children are taken from them at the border when all they've done is try to find a safer place for their children than the violent places that they were born into.

Sometimes, for those of us who live in privilege, it's all too easy to ignore the cries of parents who mourn the violent death of their children. However, some images just force us to not look away. The photographs of Emmett Till's body did just that. June 26, 2019, a photo circulated of a man and his daughter drowned in the waters of the Rio Grande, trying in desperation to enter this country. His name was Oscar Alberto Martinez and his 23-month old daughter was named Angie Valeria. They were trying to escape the violence of El Salvador.



Then there is Tala Abu Ajwa on Sept. 3 in this picture being rushed to the hospital after a bomb exploded in Gaza City killing her. It was too late. The girl in the pink roller skates is now famous among the those who have died since the Israeli/Hamas war began.



Another image that bears witness to Rizpah's cries is the hauntingly beautiful image from A Sanctified Art that you see now by Lauren Wright Pittman.



It shows Rizpah beating away the birds while the bodies of her sons sway in the background. And while the painting shows the feet of her sons' bodies, they could just as easily be the bodies of African Americans lynched by white people in the south. They could just as easily be the bodies of children gunned down in schools. They could just as easily be the bodies of immigrants desperately fleeing their countries for one that has a statue that has the words "send me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" inscribed into it.

And lest we think that such images of violence do not belong in worship, remember, you and I gather each and every week in front of a symbol of unjust violence.

It's called the cross.

The cross is a symbol of unjust violence. If Jesus had been executed in Kentucky in the 1950's, it wouldn't have been on a cross, it would have been on a lynching tree. The cross is a symbol of violence done to a man who did nothing to deserve it. Mary, the mother of Jesus, knew Rizpah's pain all too well. She is part of an unhappy club of parents who have seen their beloved children put to death because of senseless violence.

The symbol that embodies our Christian faith is an *empty* cross. It's an empty cross because Jesus' body was taken down from that lynching tree and placed in a tomb and on the third day he rose from the dead. *This* is the resurrection that we celebrate each and every time we come to this worship space.

Every time we come to this table, we proclaim that the violence done to Rizpah's sons does not have the final word. Every time we come to this table, we proclaim that the racist violence that murdered Emmett Till, the racist violence that continues to this day, does not have the final word. Every time we come to this table, we proclaim that the violence against immigrants, and the unjust policies we have against them, do not have the final word.

We come to worship a lynched God and a resurrected God. A God whose kingdom compels us to listen to the cries of the Rizpah's all around us.

- So, friends, together let us inside this sanctuary and, more importantly, *outside* of this sanctuary, end the violence that cause the Rizpah's around us to cry out in misery.
- Let us listen to their brave testimony as we worship a God who knows what it's like to bury a

child.

- Let us choose to use our privilege to stand with the oppressed and to end violence against those in the margins.

That, my friends, is not a political stance. It is a biblical stance.