

4th Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

Trigger Warning: the following sermon contains graphic details of racist violence and also contains a biblical story about a parent witnessing their children's violent death. Some might find the content traumatic.

2 Samuel 3:7; 21:1-14

Now Saul had a concubine whose name was Rizpah daughter of Aiah. And Ishbaal said to Abner, 'Why have you gone in to my father's concubine?'

Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the Lord. The Lord said, 'There is blood-guilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death.' So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. (Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had tried to wipe them out in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah.) David said to the Gibeonites, 'What shall I do for you? How shall I make expiation, that you may bless the heritage of the Lord?' The Gibeonites said to him, 'It is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul or his house; neither is it for us to put anyone to death in Israel.' He said, 'What do you say that I should do for you?' They said to the king, 'The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel— let seven of his sons be handed over to us, and we will impale them before the Lord at Gibeon on the mountain of the Lord.' The king said, 'I will hand them over.'

The king took the two sons of Rizpah daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Merab daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel son of Barzillai the Meholathite; he gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they impaled them on the mountain before the Lord. The seven of them perished together. They were put to death in the first days of harvest, at the beginning of the barley harvest.

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. When David was told what Rizpah daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done, David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan from the people of Jabesh-gilead, who had stolen them from the public square of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hung them up, on the day the Philistines killed Saul on Gilboa. He brought up from there the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan; and they gathered the bones of those who had been impaled. They buried the bones of Saul and of his son Jonathan in the land of Benjamin in Zela, in the tomb of his father Kish; they did all that the king commanded. After that, God heeded supplications for the land.

This is the first time I've ever preached on this passage. And I'd be willing to be that for most, if not all, of 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 curriculae that I know of. As far as I know, the

hymn that I 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 traumatic text, a troublesome one 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 fraught with violence and came to a bloody end.

One of Saul's many mistakes was to mess with 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 whether it was intentional or not; 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 sheriff 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. Therefore, 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.

But 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 belonged to two of her sons; their names were Armoni and Mephibosheth. Rizpah was one of Saul's many concubines and she shared these two sons with him. 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 spreads 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.

But Rizpah's testimony had 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.

Last month, Tricia and I went with Scott Cervas, the pastor of Meadowthorpe Presbyterian Church here in Lexington, to Washington D.C. to join hundreds of other Christian pastors, Jewish rabbis, and Muslim imams to implore this presidential administration to abandon their policies that bring violence to the immigrant, the poor, and the marginalized. However, we got there a day before the moral witness event to wander around D.C. The biggest portion of our free day was spent at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, one of the newest additions to the Smithsonian Institution. Right around the corner from the White House and directly next to the Washington Monument, it was first opened in September of 2016.

For me, the most powerful part of the entire museum - or at least the portions that we were able to cover in the three hours we spent there - was 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, and during the few days prior, literally tens of thousands of people stood in line to pay their respects to Emmett Till and view his mutilated body. Pretty 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. In fact, 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. A few weeks ago, 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.

Another image that bears witness to Rizpah's cries is the hauntingly beautiful image from A Sanctified Art that you will find on the front of your bulletin painted 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, may we remember that 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 probably 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.

But 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 table.

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 this table in worship of 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's a biblical one.

In the name of the lynched and resurrected God, let all of God's beloved children say, "Amen!"