

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
17 August 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

***“This is Us: Holding Vigil & Bearing Witness to Injustice
This is Good News: Our Public Witness Can Stir Hearts & Change History”***

Eighth Sermon in the Summer Series:
This is Us: Seeing Ourselves in Scripture...Reflecting Good News in our Lives

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

2 Samuel 21:1-14

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

This is a heavy and heart-wrenching text.

And—it is not without *hope*.

Perhaps as you listened to this story, you caught reverberations of themes and traumas that top our headlines still today:

- Famine, Starvation
- Scarcity of Resources
- Genocide
- Authoritarian leadership
- Leveraging human lives for negotiation
- State-sanctioned execution
- A mother refusing to silence her grief—or—let the world turn away.

And, did you catch the good news in this text? That a person in power sees and hears the experience of someone he inflicted an injustice upon and he trusts her experience, responding to it with changed behavior. This is a Hope that we

all need; a Hope within our grasp; a Hope that begins with Truth-Telling.

The Ancestors of our Faith call out to us from the pages of Scripture because they want us to recall and retell their stories so that we’ll learn from and be inspired by *their* Truth-Telling and we’ll choose to stop the cycles of violence and dehumanization that we just seem to keep perpetuating. Intentionally or not.

I don’t know about you, but as I sit with scripture and sit with the news, it becomes clearer and clearer each day that:

- Comfort will not come without challenge.
- Healing will not happen without hearing.
- Peace will not persist without protest.
- Joy will be forever harder for us to grasp without justice.

Rizpah offers us a powerful example of courageous public witness in the face of injustice. Her act of holding vigil over the bodies of her murdered sons reminds us all of the importance of bearing witness to the pains and injustices in our lives and in the world. Of *not* being silent. Of naming *what we see* and *how it affects us* and *why it matters*.

We must humanize the headlines to provoke us to collective action and to live out our faith as Christ calls us.

As a clarion call and reminder of the need for Jesus-followers (that's us) to speak up and show up, I want to frame Rizpah's story with words written from the Birmingham Jail by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr to white, moderate clergy (and their churches¹) in 1963:

I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white [Christian] moderate... [the One] who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the

presence of justice; who constantly says, "*I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action [or protest]*"; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another's freedom; who lives by the myth of time [and] constantly advises the [Oppressed] to wait until a "more convenient season."

...[It is a] strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of

¹ I realize his letter is addressed to clergy, however we are Baptists, after all—which means we enjoy the privilege of the 'priesthood of all believers'! In other

words, as you listen to King's words, remind yourself we are ALL clergy in the cause of Christ.

[those] willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.²

...Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.³

What affects Rizpah, affects *us*.

So, it's the time of King David, early in his reign. David is only the second King of Israel; he followed Saul. Saul grew up in the area of the Gibeonites, which was also the area of land assigned to the tribe of Benjamin, Saul's tribe. "We might consider the Gibeonites as indigenous people, those who were living in the land at the time that the Hebrew people were liberated from Egypt and entered Canaan."⁴

"There was an ancient treaty with the Gibeonites [and the Israelites] which King Saul

broke; Saul massacred the Gibeonites. That ethnic cleansing and attempted genocide happened some time before the events of our story. But now there is a famine. It's been going on three years."⁵

The starvation of his people causes King David to "inquire of the Lord" as to its cause. The problem, according to the Lord, is due to King Saul and 'his house' who "put the Gibeonites to death" (21:1). God is deeply grieved over the attempted genocide of the Gibeonites. So much so that creation groans and cannot produce nourishment—rain or grain.

The thing is though, King David does not *ask God* what to do about this, but instead David goes to the Gibeonites and asks them what *they* want. And the Gibeonites respond, exploiting something called the Levitical law of retributive justice (Lev. 24:17-22) against Saul (21:5). Well, actually since Saul is dead, it's against Saul's descendants. This is no longer about relieving the suffering of

² Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (August 1963), accessed at https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

³ King, *ibid*.

⁴ Rev. Kathy Donley, "Unraveled by Suffering: Transforming Trauma - 2 Samuel 21:1-14," *Sermon*

preached at Emmanuel Baptist Church (26 Sept. 2021), accessed on Aug. 17, 2025 at <https://www.emmanuelalbany.net/sermons-full/2021/10/7/92621-unraveled-by-suffering-transforming-trauma-2-samuel-211-14>.

⁵ Donley, *ibid*.

famine. This is about pay back. Vengeance.

David agrees to their terms. He condemns seven of Saul's male descendants to death, which is awful, *and also* awfully politically expedient for him. Remember, after King Saul died, there was a civil war in which David was one of several contenders for the throne. It doing what the Gibeonites want, David is also conveniently eliminating those descendants of Saul who later might claim a right to the throne.⁶ (There are so many layers to this story.)

In any case, David hands over two of Saul's sons and five of his grandsons to the Gibeonites to execute. Merab is the mother of the five grandsons. Rizpah was Saul's concubine—meaning, a slave treated like a wife, but without any of the privileges accorded to a wife. Already marginalized as a widow, Rizpah's only "status" was being the mother of "royal sons."⁷

Rev. Terry Ann Smith and Rev. Micah L. McCreary write, "this

widow's woes are intensified as her sons are ritually slaughtered in a shocking episode that is part human sacrifice and part sanctioned execution; [Rizpah's pushed even further to the margins with all her future security and livelihood is lost with the death of her sons]."⁸

By the way, the Hebrew verb that is translated as "impale" in verse six, is *yâqa'*, *yaw-kah* and means "to be hung; to rot away; to be dislocated or alienated, torn; to be executed slowly by exposure."⁹ It's public lynching.

After the horror of her son's being lynched, Rizpah goes to the site of the execution and keeps vigil over their bodies. She stays there, publicly grieving, proclaiming this trauma and injustice through her actions, her physical presence.

In her book *Womanist Midrash*, Wil Gafney paints a vivid portrait of Rizpah's vigil:

Rizpah watches the corpses of her sons stiffen, soften, swell, and sink into the stench of decay...she fights

⁶ Donley, *ibid*.

⁷ Sharon A. Buttry and Daniel L. Buttry, *Daughters of Rizpah*, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020), p.27.

⁸ Rev. Terry Ann Smith, Ph.D., and Rev. Micah L. McCreary, Ph.D., "Rizpah: Tragedy into Triumph," *Faithward: She Is Called Woman of the Bible Study*,

accessed on August 17, 2025 at

<https://www.faithward.org/rizpah-turning-tragedy-into-triumph/>.

⁹<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h3363/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

with winged, clawed, and toothed scavengers night and day. She is there from the spring harvest until the fall rains, as long as six months— sleeping, eating, toileting, protecting, and bearing witness.¹⁰

Rizpah’s vigil works; it becomes both a lament and remembrance that draws public attention and recourse.”¹¹

Rizpah stays on the mountain by the bones of her beloveds long enough that King David finally hears about it [from his people]. David’s response is unusual, unpredictable. He doesn’t send soldiers to drag her away, nor does he go to Rizpah himself to tell her stop making a scene. No, Rizpah’s grief— brought to his attention by his people—wakes something up in King David. And he goes to the village of Jabesh-Gilead.

Years earlier, Saul and Jonathan and Saul’s other warrior sons had been killed in battle and their bodies had been left exposed by their enemies. Their bones had been kept at Jabesh-Gilead and never properly buried. David goes there to

gather those bones and *then* he goes to Rizpah. Yes, he comes as the one who killed her sons. *And* he comes bringing the bones of the rest of Saul’s family who had died violently and who had also been denied the honor of a proper burial.

Both actions are true. David is not defined by one of them. And remarkably, Rizpah doesn’t hold the heart-wrenching injustice David inflicted upon her and her sons against him.

The text says that *together* David and Rizpah bury all of the bones in Saul’s family tomb at home in Benjamin.¹² What an unlikely partnership of sacred duty; it’s a gesture of spiritual or relational restoration, even though it’s not full restorative justice. (Of course, nothing could ever bring Rizpah’s precious sons back.)

“Rizpah might have been completely unraveled by her trauma. She might have been consumed with grief and anger. Yet her courage, her persistence, her refusal to be solely a victim—it shapes a new story. It is not a story where everything is made right,

¹⁰ Wil Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 200–201.

¹¹ Smith and McCreary, *ibid.*

¹² Donley, *ibid.*

because that rarely happens. But it's a story where the cycle of violence comes to an end (for now), where healing occurs, not just for her, but for many others and for the land itself as rains begin to fall again. Rizpah is unraveled by her suffering, but she transforms her trauma [through public witness] into hope and action."¹³

“Rizpah does for her sons in death what she could not do for them in life—protects them from predators.”¹⁴ She could not stop David from taking her sons, could not stop the Gibeonites from killing them. So, in her lament and witness, she does what she *can* do instead of focusing on what she cannot do or can no longer do.

Many mothers know Rizpah's grief. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, for one. And Mamie Till-Mobley, the mother of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old black boy who was removed from his relatives' home in Mississippi in 1955 by two white men, stripped naked, beaten, shot in the head, and his body dumped in the Tallahatchie River. “When Mamie-Till Mobley received the bloated

unrecognizable corpse of her son, she refused attempts to bury him quietly. Insisting on an open casket ceremony, she said, *‘I wanted the world to see what they did to my baby.’*¹⁵

Rizpah's vigil resonates with the cry for justice by countless mothers still today—mothers of precious children across our nation and around the world who fear for their children's lives, or tragically, mourn their deaths.

We, too, are called to bear witness by “being with” these mothers as they struggle with the pain of loss and these “de-centering” experiences that forever change their world. We are to abide with the traumatized in the most uncomfortable of spaces, providing the ministry of presence where there are no right answers and there are no simple fixes. This is not only the work of the shepherd or the work of pastoral care; but it is the work of the church.¹⁶ As Smith and McCreary say, “When viewed from this perspective, it becomes not just one woman's triumph, but a triumph for us all. In the words

¹³ Donley, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Smith and McCreary, *ibid.*

¹⁵ Smith and McCreary, *ibid.* By multiple sources, this line is attributed to Emmett Till's mother.

¹⁶ Smith and McCreary, *ibid.*

of Christ, “*when you have done this for the least of these, you have done it for me*” (Matt. 25:40).”¹⁷

Nothing can restore the loss of life. But our bearing witness to the pain in our lives and in the world can raise issues and situations to our awareness to perhaps prevent them from happening again, or to awake up the “King Davids” of the world to seeing the violence and tragedy they are inflicting in the name of God or in the name of “peace-keeping” or “keeping the peace,” or in the name of “safety” or “security.”

Retired American Baptist Global Servants for Peace and Justice, Sharon and Daniel Buttry, emphasize that “the real life-changing rains of relief came to break the famine NOT after the lynching, NOT after the Gibeonites had their vengeance, but *after attention was given to Rizpah. Then and only then God answers the prayer to bless the land. God responds to changed hearts resulting in changed behavior.*”¹⁸ Because—changed behavior is what changes the world, what breaks the cycles of violence and what allows

humanity to live into our fullest expression of loving one another.

Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman challenges the “capital C” Church today:

When we see injustice may we, like Rizpah, climb the mountain of God and defend those who cannot defend themselves. When we see someone unraveling in inexplicable grief, may this sight unravel us from the ways we are entangled with injustice. Beloved ones, let us pray that we can be unraveled for the good. Let us tell the truth. Let us confront the beasts. Let us put the powers to shame. With Rizpah, let us stand vigil and not go home until justice is done.¹⁹

And so, in solidarity with Rizpah, and with all grieving people in our world, we will continue this sermon by moving from Rizpah’s voice and witness to our collective voice and witness—holding vigil for the injustices and griefs and heartbreaks that weigh heavy on us. Nothing is too small or too big to share.

¹⁷ Smith and McCreary, *ibid.*

¹⁸ Buttrys, p. 49.

¹⁹ Lauren Wright Pittman, *Unraveled sermon planning guide*, <http://sanctifiedart.org>.

Like King David, sometimes we are unaware of the depth of pain that a people or place is experiencing until someone we know or are in relationship with raises it to our attention in a very personal way.

My hope is that by naming the things that weigh heavy on our hearts, we will perhaps learn something new about ourselves and our community, understand the depth of an injustice or grief in a new way, be awakened to a situation we were unaware of before, or perhaps, simply feel less alone by realizing that someone else cares about the same thing we do. Lament is a form of biblical prayer and petition. So is communal witness.

As we sing Hymn 691—*For the Troubles and the Sufferings*—be thinking of what injustice or grief you may want to share today. Then Pastor Morgan will guide us as we hold vigil together and bear witness together...becoming more awake and more aware of all the ways we long for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. Finally and forever.

And *soon*.

Amen.

Hymn 691

For the Troubles and the Sufferings

PELAS DORES ESTE MUNDO



Time of Prayer

Holding Vigil & Bearing Witness Rev.

Morgan C. Fletcher

You are invited to come forward to the communion table to light a candle and name an injustice or communal grief that you would like our community to bear witness to this morning.

After each person shares, we will say together: **“Lord, hear our prayer. May your kin-dom come on earth as it is in heaven.”**



The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts
as we forgive our debtors.**

**And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.**

+ Hymn of Response 648

Stir Your Church, O God, Our Father