

“Love in Public” Rev. Michele Ward
Unraveled Series: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apart
Psalm 31; 2 Samuel 3:6-7; 2 Samuel 21:1-14

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church, Baltimore, MD
Fifth Sunday of Easter May 10, 2020

Phyllis Trible, feminist biblical scholar, says that “the Bible is a pilgrim wandering through history to merge past and present.”¹ I’d venture to say that we, too, are pilgrims wandering trying to merge the past of this biblical text with our current time and place. So when we are confronted with the ugliness of the account of Rizpah, King Saul’s second wife, the reality of our pilgrimage hits us square in the face: we are seeking God in the landscape of this story, just like we are seeking God in the landscape of the story of our times.

Rizpah lived in the midst of political and social upheaval. King Saul is dead and David only has the loyalty of one of the twelve tribes. He cannot rule Israel without a united kingdom. His death takes her protection along with it, and she does not have any political allies. Her assets are her children, but they are a threat to David’s claim on the throne. Rizpah is the second wife of King Saul, which the NRSV translates as “concubine,” which makes her sound like Saul’s prostitute. In actuality, the Hebrew here translates her title as “secondary” or “low status” wife.²

King Ishbaal is Saul’s son. Abner is the leader of Ishbaal’s army and also made Ishbaal king. Ishbaal stands in David’s way to a united kingdom. Abner eventually betrays Ishbaal, leaving David to rule the twelve tribes of Israel as their king. Abner, in his power grabbing season of war, sexually assaults Rizpah, his deceased uncle’s wife. When his cousin, Ishbaal, confronts him, Abner does not deny it. Rizpah is the victim of sexual assault because she is not the queen mother. Ishbaal is not her son, so he cannot protect her. As Dr. Wilda C. Gafney, womanist biblical scholar writes, “Rizpah is accessible and vulnerable; her secondary status translates into a lack of financial and other insulating resources.”³ Abner was power hungry and took out his thirst for power and control on Rizpah. He could not have the throne himself, but he could have the power to make a king. And he could have the power to take the dead king’s wife and assault her.

¹ Trible, Phyllis, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 1.

²Gafney, Wilda C., “Overshadowed by Saul,” *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 198.

³Gafney, Wilda C., “Overshadowed by Saul,” *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 198-199.

This backstory is important for us to know so we can better understand the importance of her role later on in 2 Samuel. The Women's Bible Commentary tells us, "Women play a larger role in the books of Samuel than in most of the rest of the Bible ... they appear in these narratives in the domestic sphere ... in the public sphere ... and in the gray area that is the domestic sphere of a ruling family, where private decisions have public consequences."⁴ Rizpah lives in the domestic sphere and in the sphere where her private decisions have public consequences. She is the second wife of King Saul. Her children with him are legitimate, but they will never have the same entitlement to an inheritance as the children of Saul's first wife, Ahinoam. So when her children, her last security and her last loves, are brutally murdered, she throws herself into the public sphere. Her love for her children moves her into public action.

You see, David has made a deal with the tribe that Saul nearly wiped off the face of the earth in an attempt to commit genocide against the Gibeonites. God tells David that Saul's descendants have "bloodguilt" upon them because of this sin, and that the famine on the land will continue until they right that wrong. God does not give David any clues or instructions about how to proceed. God does not tell him how to absolve the bloodguilt. David takes matters into his own hands. David decides he needs to do something about it to appease God and make peace with the Gibeonites. The best solution he can come up with is asking the Gibeonites what they want. And, they want to take revenge. They ask for seven of Saul's descendants so they can execute them as payback for what Saul's army did to their people. David turns over two of Rizpah's sons as well as five of Merab's grandsons. David's motives are unclear. Is he turning them over because it is a convenient way to get rid of Saul's sons and grandsons, legitimate heirs to the throne he just took? Is this truly what God wants or is David filling in the blanks because it serves him well? Dr. Wilda C. Gafney describes the execution as a "lynching" because the Hebrew "verb *y-q* means "hang," "dislocate," and/or impale."⁵ This was a gruesome death meant to publicly shame and terrorize. This was not a sacrifice on God's behalf or done to 'protect' Israel. This was done for political gains and personal power in the name of God.

So what does their mother do? Their mother, the one who was assaulted by her nephew after her husband's death? Rizpah goes out to be with her sons. The authorities will not give her permission to bury them properly. A common means of extending the punishment to the family was to deny them the practice of burying them. 2 Samuel tells us that she stayed with their bodies for six months--from the beginning of the harvest in the spring to the end of the harvest in the fall.

⁴Hackett, Jo An, eds. Carol A Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, "1 and 2 Samuel," *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pres, 1992), 94.

⁵ Gafney, 200.

Six months, everybody. She laid out sackcloth, a rough material made of goats hair, and that is her bed. She does everything on the hill before the holy shrine where God sees her--she sleeps, she eats, she cries, she screams, and she waits. She protects their bodies from wild animals. She waits for her public display of love and outrage to change something, anything, about this unjust system. This system that married her off, gave her no rights without a husband, leaves her unprotected when he dies, does not punish the man that assaulted her, and turns her sons' lives into bartering chips. She laments and she loves in public until something changes.

And it does. David eventually gets wind of her actions and does an about face. He is so moved by what she did that he removes their bodies from the lynching site, burying them along with their father Saul and their uncle Jonathan. Then, and only then, does God forgive Israel for the near genocide of the Gibeonite tribe and end the famine. God did not want a blessing from the Gibeonites. God wanted true and vulnerable lament. Killing Rizpah's sons and Merab's grandsons did not lead to God's forgiveness. Only love in public did. Rizpah's love and lament turn God's heart towards Israel again. She is a woman who knows how to grieve, how to protect, how to persist, and how to love. God listens to the cry of her soul, and responds.

So, church, what is your soul crying out for this morning? What are you raging about today? For if we are trying to make deals like David to avoid true lament, we are in trouble. What justifications are we making to avoid our grief and pain? What deals are we setting up that do not lead to justice, but more injustice, convincing ourselves it is the only way because it was the only solution we could imagine? Drs. Allender and Longman tell us in *The Cry of the Soul*, "Emotions are the language of the soul. They are the cry that gives the heart a voice. To understand our deepest passions and convictions, we must learn to listen to the cry of the soul."⁶

This week, we mourn the loss of Yvette Matthews, Mary Randall, and countless others who died since we last were together. We rage that we cannot be together to sing their favorite songs, and hug one another, and sit and cry side by side. I am also full of lament about the delayed realization in many white communities about Ahmaud Arbery's shooting on February 23rd. Because he was a black man shot by white men in a Southern state, he did not get the attention and rage of white America until a video leaked proving that he was lynched by two white men while he went on a run in his own neighborhood. And on Ahmaud's birthday, Friday May 8, many white people posted on social media the hashtag #irunwithmaud, commemorating his life and the privilege to run while white while running 2.23 miles, the exact date of his death in February. And while I agree, it is good for white people to acknowledge that we have immense privilege in being able to exercise without

⁶Allender, Dan B. and Longman III, Tremper, *The Cry of the Soul: How Our Emotions Reveal Our Deepest Questions About God*, (Carol Stream: NavPress, 1994), 7.

fearing for our lives, I heard someone say that “if you felt better after your 2.23 mile run, you did it for the wrong reasons.”⁷

Instead, white people, go out there and lament in public. Have tough conversations regularly with other white people. No longer mumble the words racism or black. Take a hard look at the ways we white people benefit from oppression. Do not select what my friend and colleague Geremi James calls “soothing discomfort” by selecting to engage in this particular story of Ahmaud’s murder because it is convenient or because your friends are talking about it. It is our privilege to choose to engage or disengage that helped enable the murder of this young man, just like it was King David’s privilege to ignore for six months the public actions of Rizpah protecting the bodies of her sons until they received a proper burial.

Go and find your inner King David, your inner Rizpah. What do you need to lament right now? Perhaps you resonate with King David, making justifications for your choices that enable systems of oppression. Perhaps you need to take a look at the map of your life and find out what systemic racism and injustice lurks underneath the surface. Perhaps you are like Rizpah, wrongfully treated without anyone to advocate for you. Perhaps you are publically lamenting the death of people you love. And perhaps you came for a convenient hope this morning and are feeling disappointed by this sermon.

But true hope is born out of struggle, and that is what Rizpah teaches us. Her refusal to leave the bodies of her sons speaks to her strength and love. And it is her actions--not the actions of kings--that leads to God’s abundance for the nation of Israel. Because of her lament, spring truly comes. Because of her lament, her children are honored in death in ways they were not honored in life. Because of her lament, love has the last say--God’s love and her love. It is her authentic, public actions that lead to change. When we cry out to God about injustice, God hears us. When we act out our love in public, God is with us. When we are strong like Rizpah and repentant like David, God hears us. May it be so. Amen.

⁷ Keiko Parker James, Facebook post, May 9, 2020 at 7:05 pm. Accessed May 9, 2020.