



## Reading Rizpah

*TEXT*  
*2 Samuel 21:10–14*

July 12, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Hallie Hottle

I would venture to bet that most of us don't know Rizpah's story. Hers is not one of the great stories of our faith. Instead ... hers is one that once you come to know it, really know it, it sticks with you in an uncomfortable way. Rizpah's is one of the most haunting stories of our biblical text. And I believe hers is a story we need to keep us awake in these days.

We meet Rizpah at the end of the reign of King Saul. Remember with me how we got here.

Israel is a new nation. They've escaped from Egypt's slavery. They've journeyed the 40 years in the wilderness. They've arrived in the Promised Land, and governed themselves with the God's rules and judges. But quickly, they demanded a king.

Through the prophet Samuel, God named Saul as the first king of Israel. Now, Saul's time has come to an end, and God names a new king, that shepherd boy who defeats the giant — King David. Power never leaves the throne peacefully, and this transition is met with violence. It's in that messy transition that we meet Rizpah.

Rizpah is first introduced as a concubine of King Saul. But that translation isn't quite right. Already, her legacy is tragic. She isn't

a concubine. The Hebrew means something more like "secondary wife." She's a legitimate wife of King Saul, holding all the same benefits of marriage. Her "secondary" status just means that her children are not entitled to an inheritance; her two sons would have no claim to the throne themselves.

Rizpah's status, now that Saul is dead, becomes precarious. She is important enough to warrant David's competitors "taking" her, as a sign of their own power.<sup>1</sup> She is not important enough to warrant protection. She and her sons are vulnerable in the bloody mess of king-making.

Where we read for today, David is now fully king, but there is a famine in the land. For three years, there has been no rain. The crops are in peril. The food stores are shrinking. So King David inquires with God.

God tells David that there is bloodguilt on the land. The land is being punished for King Saul's killing of the Gibeonites. The land is being punished, not for something David did, but for the king who came before him. It was something David had no control over; nevertheless, the guilt remained.

So King David goes to speak with the Gibeonites, and he asks, "What shall I do for you? How shall I make reparations?"

The Gibeonites name their price: an eye for an eye. They want seven of Saul's sons to be put to death. And David quickly complies. Rizpah's sons are an easy target. So David takes her two boys and the five sons of Saul's daughter and gives them over to the Gibeonites, to be killed on the mountain before the Lord. Our translation says they are "impaled." Others use the word "hanged." The word means something like "dislocation," in this case, of the neck. They were impaled, suffocated, lynched.

And here is Rizpah. She doesn't speak a word in scripture. But she brings sackcloth, spreads it out on a rock for herself by the bodies of her lynched sons, and she refuses to leave. By day she fights off the birds of the air, and by night she fends off the wild animals. Day and night she wages her silent, grieving protest, as she protects the brutalized bodies of her boys. She does this from the beginning of the barley harvest, until fall — a season as long as six months. And still, *the rain does not come*.

It took me a long time to hear Rizpah's story, even longer to sit down and make sense of it. It was June of 2014, and I was in Birmingham, Alabama, with a group of youth from the church I was serving in Miami, Florida.

We went to a different city every year to do a week of service and learn about other communities. Our location was intentional that year. It had been two years since Trayvon Martin's murder, just a few hours north of us in Sanford, Florida. That incident naturally prompted conversations about race, in my racially diverse group of youth.

We were all growing in our awareness and awakening in those days — most especially me. My Black and Brown kids exchanged stories, about times they were stopped by police while riding their bikes on their way to youth group. My white kids gawked, startled by a reality different than theirs. My Black and Brown kids gawked back, not always realizing it hadn't happened to the white kids too. My partner for youth ministry at the time was a man my age, Black, Haitian American. He had a profound, *patient* sense of humor, waiting for the kids to be gone before he'd laugh hysterically, glad to point out where my whiteness was showing.

We spent some of that year reading Dr. King's Letter From a Birmingham Jail. So when it was time to pick our destination, that's where we decided to go.

At some point on that trip, we joined a Black Presbyterian church for Bible study. I don't remember exactly what we were studying that night. What I remember is my own self-consciousness. I remember feeling uncomfortable, as the Black pastor wove a seamless thread between his daily reality, and the biblical story. I remember watching my Black kids nod along, naturally uttering "Amen's" I never heard them say out loud in our pews. I

remember feeling naked, exposed to the presumptions of my thinking that I had anything to teach about the gospel, especially to these kids whom I loved, whose lives I knew more details of than I needed to — yet who collectively were living an experience I could not fully know, an experience Jesus was certainly in, with them.

Later that night, one of my girls asked me where she could read about Rizpah. The pastor had mentioned her earlier, and she wanted to ready her story. It was late, so I told her she needed to go to bed, and we'd talk about Rizpah in the morning. I spent that night, as my kids pretended to sleep, reading her story myself. I asked my partner if he had ever heard of her. "Yeah," he told me, as if it was obvious, "her boys were lynched. Everybody in the Black Church knows that story."

We're hearing a lot of stories we've missed before lately. Like Rizpah's, we could excuse these as being brief, as being details of larger narratives, as even unimportant — for if we've made it this long, why would we need to learn or relearn now? Like Rizpah's, we know them for the names of their victims: George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, Elijah McClain, Breonna Taylor.

And I recognize that discomfort, that self-consciousness I felt with myself that night. I recognize that for us — for white people who want to know better — that feeling of realizing you've missed something, it's happening a lot in these days, and it feels terrible, something we would rather avoid. We call it "waking up" for a reason.

I'm finding myself reading Rizpah again, as I'm still *learning the lessons of previous awakenings*. At that time six years ago, I would have said I was uncomfortable because I loved my kids, and these glimpses of the world through their eyes were brutal. That was true. But my discomfort wasn't *entirely* about them.

My discomfort was that Jesus — the one I loved, the one I so wanted my kids to love too, the reason I do all that I do — that Jesus was alive there, in that Black church in Birmingham, in ways I recognized, but that *felt distant*.

My discomfort was in realizing my whiteness wasn't just plaguing me with a privilege that blinded me to the reality of life for my Black and Brown kids. It was distancing me from the God I love.

That's the thing about white supremacy: It captures us all in its insidious web. It most hurts our Black and Brown communities, but it prevents *all of us* from experiencing the fullness of the gospel. What I'm continually, uncomfortably awakening to is that the liberation Jesus came for is never "for them." It's always "for all," and until we come to find ourselves within Rizpah's story — not on the throne but sitting on that rock with nothing to lose — until we come to see ourselves as needing liberation too, we will never experience the freedom of Christ's promised day.

King David hears of what Rizpah is doing. And he is moved. He goes then to the place where the bodies of Saul and his son Jonathon had been left, discarded, abandoned. David gathers up their bones and returns to take down the bones of these seven lynched boys.

Together, the bones are buried. And finally, God heeds the supplications for the land.

*Then, only then, the rains come.*

This story is rarely lifted up in the sanctuaries of our white churches. And that itself is an indication of the problem before us. *For there is a famine in our land* — a famine spurred by bloodguilt never properly repaid. Generation after generation, we bear witness to the mourning of mothers, grieving the bodies of lynched children. And we might hate that. We might condemn the systems that perpetuate this inevitable cycle. But I'm not sure we recognize that we are starving too.

Later in that trip to Birmingham, we visited the Civil Rights Institute, located there across the street from the 16th Street Baptist Church. If you've never been, you should go.

I was nervous going there. All of my kids were good kids. They got the important things right. But things like being quiet when they were supposed to be quiet were not their strong suit. We talked about sacred space, and what it means to visit a place with reverence. And I realized I didn't need to stress, as they quietly toured the exhibits.

There's this one exhibit there where you're confronted with life-sized images of people, mostly white people, holding up offensive signs towards Black protestors, some wearing hoods as members of the KKK. As we began to enter that room, I asked my kids to walk around it alone, and silently. A few minutes in, I noticed a group of them off to one side, whispering intently with each other. I marched

over to scold whatever was happening here, only to find that some of my kids were huddled together, crying. One of my white girls, with eyes rimmed in red, pointed at a photo of a young white girl screaming at a Black student attempting to integrate a school, and she asked me, "If we were alive then, would this have been us?"

That's the question, isn't it?

It's a question as live now as it's ever been. We are living in overdue days, while protests rage to take down the bones still haunting our hillsides. And my fear is that we — those in the white church who strive to be woke, who read and learn and do all 10 days of action — my fear is that we've grown so insulated in the comfort of our white theology, so isolated by our inheritance of segregation, so unbothered by the benefits of our own supremacy, that we can live in this moment and think it doesn't have anything to do with us.

You know, I've been able to have some interesting conversations with some of you in this past month since our Black Lives Matter protests started. I've been participating with our protests here locally since they began. Some of you have had questions — genuine good questions you are trying to understand. I'm grateful for that.

One of your questions is, pretty consistently, "Why am I protesting?" I initially responded with some of the demands our protesters are making ... but that's not what you meant.<sup>2</sup> You wanted to know why I was protesting.

That seems like it should be an easy question for me to answer. But it's caused me more thinking and

prayer than I would have anticipated. I've had to pause, because I've noticed within myself this bubbling up of discomfort that I recognize from *previous moments of awakening*. I have learned that discomfort has much to teach us.

The truth is, it's hard to articulate why I am protesting, when I can't imagine that I wouldn't be. It feels too obvious to explain, yet we're living in days where it's not, so let me try.

I could say I'm protesting for my kids in Miami who taught me so much — who I regret had a pastor with so much to learn.

I could tell you about my neighborhood — for we have only ever lived east of Troost. I haven't had a white neighbor in the almost five years we've lived in Kansas City. I could say it's for my neighbors, but there's selfishness in that. I know some of them are still careful around me, because I embody, more casually than I realize, the Amy Coopers of our world — and I am desperate for that to end for all of us.<sup>3</sup>

I could say it's because my risk of coronavirus is lower, based solely on skin color — explain that we're watching our Black and Brown communities get sick at rates three times that of white communities, dying twice as often, and how we decided to prioritize an economy that depends on their labor, independent of their risk — how this movement is not happening in spite of the pandemic, but fueled by it.<sup>4</sup>

I could say it's because I haven't slept since realizing the zip code I live in has an average life expectancy that is 11 years shorter than the one this church

sits in, which is based on race, and poverty, and is not an accident.<sup>5</sup>

I could say it's because I know there was another season of protests in this city, where white people took the streets, and in 1953 even burned down a school to prevent integration, and we white people have some marching to do in reparation.<sup>6</sup>

I could say it's because you've called me to be a pastor to young adults, and Ryan Stokes, Dante Franklin, Terrance Bridges, Cameron Lamb — killed by KCPD — are all young adults.

But really, it's all of that and more. I'm going to protests because when I read the story of Rizpah, I can't imagine myself anywhere but on that rock, waving the beasts away with her. I am protesting because my faith says I must. I am protesting because I have seen Jesus in those protest crowds, and the liberation he came for is impossible until we all decide Black Lives Matter.

Outside of your questions meant to learn and support, there have been other messages. Some are quick to say that these issues are complicated, that not everything is black and white, that there are bad apples and all lives matter. Some even think that I'm being divisive by my participation.

My discomfort in my awaking in these days is not that we don't all agree on current issues. That is expected. But, while the questions before us are being *used* by current day politics — these are just the questions asked by the Gospel, in this and every day — by the Christ who always, *always*, is on the side of those who stand as victims to power.

My kid asked, “If we were alive then, would we have been them?”

It's a haunting question that I think Dr. King continues to speak into. I close by reading some of his letter from the Birmingham City Jail, written in April of 1963. Dr. King writes in response to a letter from eight “liberal” white Alabama clergymen, who had effectively asked Dr. King to wait, to stop with the protests, let the battle for integration make its way through the courts.

I've changed some words to make the naming of race appropriate for our own day. I encourage you to read the letter in its entirety.<sup>7</sup> Towards the end of his letter, he writes:

*I have been disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions. [He goes on to name those.]*

*[...] I do not say that as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say it as a minister of the gospel who loves the church, who was nurtured in its bosom, who has been sustained by its Spiritual blessings, and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.*

*I had the strange feeling when I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery several years ago that we would have the support of the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests, and rabbis of the South would be some of our strongest allies. Instead, some few have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its*

*leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.*

*In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and with deep moral concern serve as the channel through which our just grievances could get to the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.*

*I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers say, follow this decree because integration is morally right and the [Black man] is your brother. In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon [Black lives]<sup>8</sup>, I have watched white churches stand on the sidelines and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. [...]*

*There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period that the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was the thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being “disturbers of the peace” and “outside agitators.” But they went on with the conviction that they*

were “a colony of heaven” and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be “astronomically intimidated.” [...]

*Things are different now. The contemporary church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church’s often vocal sanction of things as they are.*

*But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. I meet young people every day whose disappointment with the church has risen to outright disgust.*

*I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. [...]*

Friends, from Dr. King’s day to our own, progress has been made, but famine continues. I don’t believe the rain will come, until we, in the white church, see that our own children will be hung up by this system too, until we take the bones down, until we see that “our liberation is bound together.”<sup>9</sup>

So if the current movement of protests is making you uncomfortable, I beg you, sit with that. Explore it. Read Rizpah’s story. Read Dr. King’s letter.

If the current protests are encouraging you, don’t be so sure that those next to you feel the same. Talk about it. Ask questions. Wade into the mess that you might say or do something wrong, and be willing to learn from it. There is more awakening to do.

Whatever we do in these days, I pray we are haunted — by Rizpah’s story, by Dr. King’s words — enough that we don’t go back to sleep. Christ’s promised day is not something we wait for, but something we work for, and we are living in days where we get to witness, and participate in that work.

So until the day that rain falls, until justice flows, may we work without ceasing. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>In this story, Rizpah is raped by Abner. “Rape” language wasn’t used for the live version of this sermon.

<sup>2</sup>Demands referenced here: <https://www.kmbc.com/article/mayor-quinton-lucas-signs-list-of-changes-black-lives-matter-leaders-want-to-see-made-in-kansas-city-missouri/32783237#>

<sup>3</sup>Amy Cooper is the name of a white woman who called police on a Black man in Central Park on May 25, 2020 without cause. A summary of the story can be found here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/nyregion/amy-cooper-false-report-charge.html>

<sup>4</sup>Recent reporting on coronavirus as it’s relationship to race in the U.S.: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/05/us/coronavirus-latinos-african-americans-cdc-data.html>

<sup>5</sup>Zip Code 64130: 69.9 years: <https://data.kcmo.org/dataset/Life->

[expectancy-by-Zip-Code/mird-jset/data](https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/interactives/where-you-live-affect-show-long-you-live.html), vs. Zip Code of Village Church 66208: <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/interactives/where-you-live-affect-show-long-you-live.html>.

<sup>6</sup>Kevin Gotham, Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development, 2nd ed. (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2014), 72.

<sup>7</sup>Read/listen to entire letter: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>

<sup>8</sup>Original “Negro” language changed in live version, to reflect language of our own day.

<sup>9</sup>Quote originally by artist and activist Lilla Watson. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lilla\\_Watson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lilla_Watson)

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermon-sermon-archives.html>.