

Rizpah

II Samuel 3:7, 21:1-14

Center Church, Hartford

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A mother watches her sons killed unjustly by politically powerful people. She cries out at the injustice and wants to take her sons' bodies and give them, at least, the dignity of burial. Her grief has a transformational effect on those around her.

As Rizpah's story reminds us, this has been going on for thousands of years.

The bodies of those least powerful but, somehow, most threatening taken by those more powerful but, somehow, threatened.

The mothers, grandmothers, aunts, daughters, nieces, wives, shown to us in paintings, in photographs, and now in living color on screens, crying out for justice, crying out in passionate sadness, weary beyond all weariness.

And yes, the fathers, grandfathers, sons and husbands, too.

It's hard to sustain the energy of grief. I can't imagine Rizpah out there on that mountain among the dead for at least 5 months. God bless those who supported her with food and water. This woman who had been used all her life, forcibly made concubine, not wife, she must have been too low status for that. Raped by more than one man. Hearing David make a mockery of God's name to justify getting rid of his political rivals, among them, her sons, and the sons of Saul's daughter. Refusing to believe that her God would require the deaths of these men in order to stop a famine. No, her God is the one who heard the cries of the widow and the orphan and brought them justice. Her God is the one who called the powerful to account, who, as the prophet Samuel's mother had sung, "breaks the bows of the mighty and shatters adversaries." Her God is the one who gave Abraham a ram in the wilderness to stop the senseless sacrifice of his son, Isaac. Her God does not require human sacrifice. She would not leave the bodies of her sons until justice was done. Her persistent grief and love that lasted beyond death shamed David, who must still have had some remembrance of God. She could not bring her sons back to life, but she could see them treated justly in death. And only after they were, did the famine break.

On June 3, I stood up at the Capitol with hundreds of people mourning the death of George Floyd, gathered around a symbolic casket. I heard Melinda Johnson of the Hartford YWCA, a mother of a young black son, say this: "As George Floyd took his very last breath ... he didn't know that it would take him laying in a box dead before a nation called his name and cried out for transformation. We stand here because we have too many mothers, too many daughters with too many friends, too many lovers laying in boxes, dead. Black women, our feet are tired. I don't know what it will take for us to change our minds about how we groom this next generation. But our children are watching right now The sign behind me says 'racism was the original pandemic.' Turn your pain into action," she said, "... we **can** change this; we **will** change this. We **must** change this."

King David did not grieve the injustice of his action. He used religion to justify it, as religion was used to justify slavery for centuries in this country. Until we can grieve, until we can join with the grieving families of Floyd, Taylor, Arbery, Bland, Martin, and so many more, and understand that God grieves their deaths, too, we cannot hope to change anything. Until we can stop looking for excuses for unjust killings, we cannot hope to change anything. Until we can publicly insist that right be done, even though it may take a long time and even though we may get tired of it, we cannot hope to change anything. Until we listen as attentively to the story of Rizpah as we do to stories that use religion to cover injustice, we cannot hope to change anything.

Racism has unraveled this country from the very beginning. Today, with Rizpah, we take one more step in the hope that we can weave a new tapestry. We grieve. May we commit to grieving as long as it takes to turn our pain into action. If you have not entered in to the work of this moment in America yet, then do not let this day pass without taking a step. If you cannot march, write letters and emails calling for justice. Talk with your friends and family. Call out white privilege when you see it, especially on social media. And pray with the soul-empowering energy of Rizpah on that mountain for the long haul. Time to turn our pain and sadness into action. This famine that leaves us hungry and thirsty for justice will only end when we do. Amen.