



Rizpah's Children

BY REV. DR. MARILYN P. TURNER

AMERICAN BAPTIST HOME MISSION SOCIETIES

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*Adapted from a sermon presented at a meeting of the
General Board of American Baptist Churches USA in June 2006*

2 Samuel 21:3-10

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."

But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Saul's son Jonathan, because of the oath of the Lord that was between them, between David and Jonathan son of Saul. 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 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.

Rizpah's children are not often the subject of a sermon. Yet, their story "preaches" and we need to take heed to its message. It is found in and among other stories of King David's exploits in the book of Second Samuel.

At the surface, 2 Samuel 21:3-10 is difficult because of the odd variety of names it contains. One odd sounding name to 21st century ears, Mephiboseth, is mentioned twice in Second Samuel. However, the name references two totally different Mephiboseths and, although they are both related to King Saul, the one concerning us in this text is King Saul's son by his concubine Rizpah. The other, mentioned in chapter nine and referenced again here, is King Saul's grandson born to Jonathan, Saul's son.

At a slightly deeper level, the story of Rizpah's children is not in the correct place chronologically in these tales of King David. Most scholars agree that 2 Samuel 21 and the following four chapters together probably make up an appendix to the book. However, in a timeline of events, this text belongs before 2 Samuel 9, preceding David's question: "Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?"

At a much deeper level, this text confronts us with difficult questions about our hero, David. Everyone loves David: the shepherd boy, Goliath slayer and poet. He was a warrior extraordinaire and music maker; he defeated the dreaded Philistines and restored the Ark of the Covenant to Israel. A man of honor, he refused to fight against the jealous and wrathful King Saul. He was a man after God's own heart whom God himself elevated to the position of King of Israel. But when we read this text, there's no mistaking the disturbing reality that David was party to a despicable act: the murder of seven innocents.

Then there was Rizpah. She was powerless to make authorities recognize that her children were, by all scriptural accounts, completely innocent, guilty of nothing other than being related to Saul. She was determined that their deaths would not be easily forgotten or quietly swept under a rug. So Rizpah stood vigil over seven slain sons of two brokenhearted mothers. To find out how this picture of treachery emerged, we need to go back in the story of Israel's relationship with Gibeon.

In Joshua 9, the Gibeonites, fearful of the invading Israelites, pretend to be distant travelers who have come to make a treaty. Their story seemed believable enough and the Israelites agreed to a covenant of peace with them, one that seemed to have lasted for many years, until Saul became king.

The Bible does not say when or how Saul attacked the Gibeonites, but the results are described as deliberate destruction such that the Gibeonites "should have no place in all the territory of Israel" (2 Samuel 21:5). Then there was famine in the land of Israel for three years and finally David asked God what was going on. He learned that the famine was due to Saul's massacre of the Gibeonites, prompting David to ask the Gibeonites, "What shall I do for you? How shall I make amends so that you will bless the Lord's inheritance?" (2 Samuel 21:3).

It seems that David offered the Gibeonites money, because they replied, “It is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul or his house” (2 Samuel 21:4). The reality David confronted is still true today: we cannot simply buy our way out of every mess we get ourselves into. When it became apparent that money could not proffer the results he desired, King David asked the Gibeonites yet again, “What shall I do for you? How shall I make amends?” In these words lies the age-old dilemma of the whole of humanity. Something is terribly wrong. Sin is at someone’s door and atonement is obviously necessary.

Reconciliation of evil is only made possible by the high and holy act of God. The cross of Christ alone has the cleansing and healing power that was completely absent from the gallows at Gibeon. Although he was a man after God’s heart, King David did not know about Calvary. His attempt at reconciliation in this story amounted to an awful attempt to make things right through the slaughter of children, the grandsons of Saul and sons of his concubine, Rizpah.

Powerful people still make decisions which directly or indirectly devastate the lives of the children today. These children — 21st century children of Rizpah — are among us today are unable to direct or even impact forces that rule their lives. Rizpah’s children are the abandoned and abused children who



are invisible because they are everywhere and, because they are everywhere, they go unnoticed until they commit a terrible act. Then they are punished all over again. Rizpah’s children fill our schools, our courts, our juvenile justice systems and then finally our prisons. Rizpah’s children are young mothers who will raise children just like themselves. Rizpah’s children fail at school, with their peers, and in the larger community around them.

Rizpah stood vigil. From the beginning of the harvest in the spring until the rain poured down from the heavens on the bodies in the fall, she did not let the birds of the air touch them by day or the wild animals by night. For six months of harvest, Rizpah guarded the bodies of her sons and the grandsons of Saul and, although she could do nothing to forestall the decay of the flesh from their bones, she refused to allow the birds of the air to touch them by day or the wild animals by night.



Rizpah's watch included not just the remains of her own children, but those of Saul's five grandsons. Rizpah was as diligent in her watch over the five as she was over her own two. God will tug at our hearts until our heart strings are expanded to include justice and mercy for all of Rizpah's children — those living beyond our homes, families, church walls, communities and nation. What might happen if our passion for Rizpah's children became as great as our passion for our own? Might we like Rizpah discover that we have children beyond what we comprehend?

Rizpah, believing these were all her children who had met their death on the gallows, was compelled to stand vigil for the fallen seven. Yet, no matter how diligent Rizpah was, it is hard to believe she could have warded off both bird and beast night and day for six months all by herself. She would have had to attend to her bodily functions and, at some time, she would have had to drink and to eat. Rizpah's actions on behalf of her children and the children of another might well have drawn a great deal of attention. Others noticed. They wanted an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of children impacted by evil.

I believe these others came and stood with Rizpah. When her own strength failed, when sleep came and thirst parched her weary soul, I believe these others battled birds of prey and wild animals side-by-side with Rizpah. And then, one morning Rizpah awoke to realize that she had given birth to a new breed of children. Rizpah's children had been transformed from defeated, dead, dry, weather-worn bones into a people of prayer and purpose and passion. A people arose who are willing to take a stand for the most helpless among us, to speak truth to power until all are treated with justice and mercy. These children of Rizpah are committed to bringing public attention to decisions made in the halls of power that affects the weakest, invisible and most vulnerable among us.

This new breed of Rizpah's children are living today. They are American Baptists, standing side-by-side to fight off the jackals of society who would make war with our children impacted by poverty. And we must engage the battle until justice rolls down like mighty waters and righteousness grows like an ever flowing stream and mercy resounds like the waves on the ocean.



Rev. Dr. Marilyn P. Turner is American Baptist Home Mission Societies' associate executive director for Missional Life and Leadership. In that capacity, she oversees and leads the missional networking and collaborative ministry efforts of the ABHMS. Some of those efforts include discipleship, missional church, community transformation, justice for children, volunteerism, advocacy and networking relating to chaplains, intercultural strategies and placement services for pastors and laity. Rev. Dr. Turner is an associate minister of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Penllyn, Pa., where she has served as executive minister and director of Christian education.



American Baptist Home Mission Societies
P.O. Box 851
Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851

www.abhms.org
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