

There was a famine in the land. Year after year. People were struggling, starving. And they were looking for answers. Why is this happening? Whose fault is it that we are struggling this way?

David inquires of the Lord and learns that it is because his predecessor, Saul, has mistreated the Gibeonites. David asks the Gibeonites what can be done to right this wrong and they ask for 7 of Saul's sons to die. And it says that these 7 sons are killed together on a mountain at the beginning of the harvest.

We learn that 2 of these are the sons of Rizpah. All we have heard about Rizpah before in this story, way back in 2 Samuel 3, is that she is a concubine wife of Saul who was sexually assaulted. She is a "low status" wife whose sons would not have received an inheritance. And now they are killed to avenge a wrongdoing of her husband's.

Rizpah is a woman with little power to begin with who has now lost her 2 sons. Her life had completely unraveled. The story tells us that faced with these circumstances, she went to the sight of the killings, and she took her sackcloth, the cloth of mourning and she made a tent. And she held vigil, we don't know how long but it could have been months, she held vigil and she protected the bodies of her children and the other victims so that the birds of the air or the wild animals by night would not defile them any more. Wilda Gafney, in her commentary says, Rizpah is up there, "sleeping, eating, toileting, protecting, and bearing witness. Moved by her actions, David retrieves the unburied bones of Saul and Jonathan from the people who took them when they had been left to rot. He gives them a proper burial, along with the sons of Rizpah and the sons of Merab. Then, and only then, does God break the famine." Rizpah's very public grief and bearing witness has led to a very small act of justice and restoration for her sons and for Merab's sons and for Saul and his son Jonathan.

When I first saw that this heartwrenching Scripture had fallen on the day that we in the United States celebrate Mother's Day, I thought that this was a terrible coincidence. But then I thought about the origins of Mother's Day and thought that maybe this Scripture was far more fitting than I initially realized.

It was 150 years ago, in 1870 shortly after the end of the Civil War that Julia Ward Howe proposed a Mother's Peace Day that was to be focused on the eradication of war. Her movement didn't take hold outside of her town. More than 30 years later, Anna Jarvis took up the cause and it was eventually made a national holiday.

But the words of Julia Ward Howe's original plea for a Mother's Peace Day could be the words of Rizpah on that terrible mountain where the 7 sons were slain in the name of war and conflict. Listen to some of the words of the original Mother's Day proclamation:

Arise, all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or of tears!

"Our sons shall not be taken from us

From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says, “Disarm, disarm! The sword is not the balance of justice.”

From the time of Rizpah to Julia Ward Howe until now, women have been bearing witness to deep grief and injustice and calling us to change our ways. From Mother’s Against Drunk Drivers to Moms Demand Action to the Million Mom March or the individual action of mothers like Mamie Till or Valerie Castile, the deep grief of mother’s has been calling us to action since the time of our ancestors.

Austin Channing Brown reminds us, “Rizpah lost a son to state sanctioned violence. She wouldn't let the violence be forgotten. She wouldn't let it be swept under the rug. She led a protest of one, fighting off beasts to bring what measure of dignity for the bodies and indictment for the rulers that was in her power to do. The Word says that she took her sackcloth and made a tent out of it. Her tool for mourning became the shelter under which she led her ferocious vigil.”

Rizpah shows us an honest, unapologetic grief and persistent strength in honoring the innocent lives of those taken from her. Her public unraveling motivates the king to amend, as best he can, some of his wrongs. Rizpah’s public unraveling causes the unraveling of David’s distorted version of justice. God ends the famine when David listens to the voice of this strong, fierce, unraveling woman.

As we think about our stories of unraveling, this story reminds us of the strength and persistence of women. This story reminds us that sometimes we need a public unraveling, a public grief to inspire us to action.

My hope and prayer is that we can each be more like Rizpah. That when we see injustice, we can climb the mountain of God and defend those who cannot defend themselves. That when necessary, our public unraveling can inspire action towards justice for those whose most need allied voices.

What public grief do you need to bear witness to? Where do you want to inspire action? There are so many places where a public unraveling of systems and expectations and practices is needed. Where do you feel led to bear witness? Is it in a conversation with a family member? Or a contribution to a cause? Or even a Facebook declaration of belief. Where do you want to inspire action towards justice and peace and love of neighbor? The opportunities are endless.

So, arise all you who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or of tears. **From the bosom of** the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says, “Disarm, disarm! The sword is not the balance of justice.” We have work to do to see the peace of Christ be spread among our neighbors, among nations. Arise, keep vigil. Arise, bear witness. Arise, arise, arise.

May it be so. Amen.