

RIZPAH: THE INTERCESSOR
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: II Samuel 21: 7-14 (NEB)

The king agreed to hand them over, but he spared Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, son of Saul, because of the oath that had been taken in the Lord's name by David and Saul's son Jonathan. The king then took the two sons whom Rizpah daughter of Aiah had borne to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth, and the five sons whom Merab, Saul's daughter, had borne to Adriel son of Barzillai of Meholah. He handed them over to the Gibeonites, and they flung them down from the mountain before the Lord; the seven of them fell together. They were put to death in the first days of harvest at the beginning of the barley harvest. Rizpah, daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it out as a bed for herself on the rock, from the beginning of harvest until the rains came and fell from heaven upon the bodies. She allowed no bird to set upon them by day nor any wild beast by night. When David was told what Rizpah daughter of Aiah the concubine of Saul had done, he went and took the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan from the citizens of Jabesh-gilead, who had stolen them from the public square at Bethshan, where the Philistines had hung them on the day they defeated Saul at Gilboa. He removed the ones of Saul and Jonathan from there and gathered up the bones of the men who had been hurled to death. They buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the territory of Benjamin at Zela, in the grave of his father Kish. Everything was done as the king ordered, and thereafter the Lord was willing to accept prayers offered for the country.

I would like to begin this Mother's Day sermon by sharing with you some of the many things that my mother taught me:

My Mother taught me LOGIC..."If you fall off that swing and break your neck, you can't go to the store with me."

My Mother taught me MEDICINE..."If you don't stop crossing your eyes, they're going to freeze that way."

My Mother taught me TO THINK AHEAD..."If you don't pass your spelling test, you'll never get a good job!"

My Mother taught me ESP..."Put your sweater on; don't you think that I know when you're cold?"

My Mother taught me TO MEET A CHALLENGE..."What were you thinking? Answer me when I talk to you...Don't talk back to me!"

My Mother taught me HUMOR... "When that lawn mower cuts off your toes, don't come running to me."

My Mother taught me how to BECOME AN ADULT... "If you don't eat your vegetables, you'll never grow up."

My mother taught me about GENETICS... "You are just like your father!"

My mother taught me about my ROOTS... "Do you think you were born in a barn?"

My mother taught me about the WISDOM of AGE... "When you get to be my age, you will understand."

My mother taught me about ANTICIPATION... "Just wait until your father gets home."

My mother taught me about RECEIVING... "You are going to get it when we get home."

And, my all-time favorite - JUSTICE... "One day you'll have kids, and I hope they turn out just like YOU -- then you'll see what it's like!"¹

Of course none of that is true. Jane Blaine was one of the most gregarious human beings I have ever known. She would have laughed the loudest at this list and wondered what length preachers will go to in the effort to capture the congregation's attention.

The story of Rizpah that I read to you from the book of II Samuel has always captured my attention and imagination. It is a remarkable testimony to a mother's vigilance on behalf of her children. Rizpah also teaches us something about intercession that reaches far deeper than the muddy ponds of wordy prayers begging for a miracle.

¹ Aha Jokes at, <http://www.ahajokes.com/par037.html>. Downloaded on May 5, 2011.

The story line is quite simple. Israel is suffering a severe a famine. In the ancient Hebrew world, the earth suffered as a result of human disobedience. King David seeks to find an explanation and discovers that the drought is caused by the cruelty that King Saul perpetrated against the Gibeonites. In the ancient world bloodguilt could only be satisfied by blood. Therefore David orders the execution of all of the male descendents of Saul with the exception of Mephibosheth who was the son of Jonathan. These were the five sons of Saul's daughter, Merab; and the two sons of Rizpah, Saul's concubine. Concubines were the norm for men who could afford multiple wives. The seven men were thrown off of a mountain and their bodies left to exposure. Failure to provide proper funerary rites was a grievous insult to both the deceased and their families. The dead could not rest, nor their loved ones.

Understand that the mother, Rizpah, is a powerless woman – powerless because she is a woman; powerless because she is second or third in a long list of wives; powerless because of her association with a fallen regime. Rizpah has no friends in high places who might pull a few strings and secretly arrange to have the bodies buried. She has no advocate, political action committee, or mutual support group to come to her aid. Rizpah has no followers on Facebook, Twitter, website, or blog.

The poverty of her plight is apparent in the pathetic cloth she spreads over a rock. Day and night Rizpah sits on the rag, from the barley harvest in the early spring until the rains in the fall. There she sits in the heat of the day with blowing winds, driving and stinging rain, wind, and the cold of the night air. She seldom budges from her spot. Her only movement is to throw stones at the jackals and hyenas at night who

come to feed off the bodies. During the day she shoos away the vultures and crows whose carrion appetites would strip the bodies of flesh. She watches as insects and weather deteriorate their bodies to bleached bones. There is no testimony that she ever speaks to anyone, nor does she keep a journal, nor petitions for relieve. No doubt hers is a silent vigil, expecting no one to intercede on her behalf.

The only intercession that Rizpah can offer to her sons is the whispered dignity that her presence offers them. To the limits of her ability she will not have them defiled. She will not abandon them until the simple justice of burial is achieved. That is all she seems to be able to do and we have no record that she did anything else.

But apparently someone sees this woman keeping watch over her dead sons day in and day out. They tell King David Rizpah's story. I would not be surprised if he had totally forgotten about her. With all of the responsibilities of a nation constantly under threat of war, the events of six months ago are no longer in his consciousness. All we know is that someone tells the story. We have no knowledge of a special plea or petition, just a story. David's sense of fairness or justice prevails. He allows the children and grandchildren of Saul to be properly buried along with Saul and Jonathan. We have no clue what happened to Rizpah.

I have known many such mothers in my lifetime. They are the ones who keep the vigil of their children's birth. She sits up with them in the hospital when they have their appendix removed. Rizpah is the mother that sits at the table in the late evening trying to figure out another way to explain algebra or a broken heart. This is the mother that fusses over her own daughter's wedding and cannot sleep at night when the first divorce is announced. Rizpah is the daughter who becomes the mother who

watches her own parents waste away in hospice rooms. And there are times when this woman watches a child convicted of a crime, sent to prison, or executed.

Rizpah takes a call at 2:00 in the morning. It is her son's girlfriend. He is drunk and hit her. He is downstairs in the parking lot punching on the hoods of her neighbor's cars. Rizpah gets in her car and drives to the apartment. He is already handcuffed and sitting in the back of a police cruiser. Rizpah checks to make sure that the girlfriend is not hurt and drives home with a heavy heart. The boy spends the night in the drunk tank on a charge of drunk and disorderly. She leaves him there. He is released the next day and given a court date. The son knows not to call home and ask for a ride. So he walks six or eight miles to get there. He is broken hearted, knowing that he has destroyed his relationship with the girl. Rizpah listens to his story and begins the quiet conversation about alcoholism. She goes with him to his court hearing and makes him pay his own fine. This is the vigil that many mothers have kept.

Children die of many causes and Rizpah is the mother who keeps the watch and drives away the vultures of shame and the jackals of blame. She pays attention to all of the nuances and possibilities. She stands guard not because she thinks her children are perfect but because she loves them and knows in the marrow of her bones that they are worthy of her dignity and respect. The mother knows this when everyone else is convinced of their culpability and keen to plow them into furrows of disdain.

When the church talks about intercession – God's intercession or intercessory prayer – it is often thought of as some kind of magical intervention. It is seldom about the hard work of keeping watch, healing, and restoring.

I am reminded of an Amish boy and his father visiting a mall for the very first time. They were amazed by almost everything they saw, but especially by two shiny, silver walls that could move apart and back together again. The boy asked his father, "What is this, Father?" The father responded, "Son, I have never seen anything like this in my life. I don't know what it is."

While the boy and his father were watching wide-eyed an old lady in a wheel chair rolled up to the moving walls and pressed a button. The walls opened and the lady rolled between them into a small room. The walls closed and the boy and his father watched small circles of lights with numbers above the walls light up. They continued to watch the circles light up in the reverse direction. The walls opened up again and a beautiful 24-year-old woman stepped out.

The father said to his son, "Go get your Mother."²

Intercession is not a silver box with lights that one walks into and things are supernaturally changed. Intercession is the pleading or mediation, the effort to bring conflicted parties together for the purpose of reconciliation. It means to plead on behalf of another person. In Rizpah's story she pleads by her actions and her self-disciplined watchfulness. Intercession is the work of restoring relationships. And for all of his glory, power, and reputation it is not the regal David who is the origin of restoration. The intercessor is none other than a weather beaten, broken hearted mother.

All over the world this morning mothers are keeping watch over their children. Mothers in Africa nurse children suffering from AIDS or malaria. Mothers in Wichita are rooting for their children on the soccer field while others pace the floor at the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit.

Years ago, a young mother was making her way across the hills of South Wales, carrying her tiny baby in her arms, when she was overtaken by a blinding blizzard. She

² Found at <http://www.makeitclearnow.org/relhumor.html>. Downloaded May 6, 2011.

never reached her destination. Rescuers searched for her when the blizzard had subsided. Her body was found by beneath a mound of snow. Underneath her body they found her baby wrapped up in all of her outer clothing. When they unwrapped the child, to their great surprise and joy, they found he was alive and well. She had mounded her body over his and given her life for her child, proving the depths of her mother love. Years later that child, David Lloyd George, grown to manhood, became prime minister of Great Britain, and, without doubt, one of England's greatest statesman.³

This is the story of Rizpah. It is the story of mothers throughout history and around the world. It is the story of compassion. We read these words from a Buddhist text, the *Metta Sutta*:

As a mother watches over her child, willing to risk her own life to protect her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, suffusing the whole world with unobstructed loving kindness.

This is the story of Rizpah. It is the story of intercession that is always bound to grace and unobstructed loving kindness. The Hebrew word for compassion is *rachem*. It means love and mercy. A related word is *rechem*, meaning the womb where the fetus is protected and nurtured for the nine months of gestation. Just because the baby is born it does not mean that the womb is closed to ever vigilant compassion.

To all of the Rizpahs of the world, Happy Mother's Day.

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³ As told by James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited, Tyndale, 1972, p. 375.