



## **FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT & WORLD AIDS DAY LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, November 30, 2008 or Monday December 1, 2008**

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**Lection - 2 Samuel 21:1-14** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the LORD. The LORD said, “There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death.” (v. 2) So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had tried to wipe them out in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah. (v. 3) 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?” (v. 4) 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?” (v. 5) 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—(v. 6) 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.”

(v. 7) 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. (v. 8) 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; (v. 9) 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.

(v. 10) 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. (v. 11) When David was told what Rizpah daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done, (v. 12) David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan from the people of Jabesh-gilead, who had stolen them from the public square of Bethshan, where the Philistines had hung them up, on the day the Philistines killed Saul on Gilboa. (v.13) He brought up from there the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan; and they gathered the bones of those who had been impaled. (v. 14) They buried the bones of Saul and of his son Jonathan in the land of Benjamin in Zela, in the tomb of his father Kish; they did all that the king commanded. After that, God heeded supplications for the land.

## **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

The World Health Organization established World AIDS Day (WAD) in 1988. WAD is observed every year on December 1<sup>st</sup>. WAD is an opportunity for every institution in our society to raise awareness and focus attention on the *global* AIDS epidemic. Each year, themes unite and guide observers. This year, leadership is the theme: **Take the Lead!** People all over the world are asked to pledge their leadership to stop the spread of AIDS.<sup>1</sup>

African American churches all over the country have taken the leadership role to express Christ's compassion by speaking out against complacency, providing pastoral and congregational care to those infected and affected by HIV, and addressing the veil of stigma and injustice. Churches incorporate awareness days such as WAD, the Black Church Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS, Our Church Lights the Way: The Black Church HIV-Testing Campaign, and African American, Women and Girls, and Caribbean AIDS Awareness Days into their liturgical calendars to raise awareness of the devastation. African Americans represent 13% of the US population but represent half of the 40,000 new HIV infections each year.

It is purposeful and significant that World AIDS Day falls so close to the First Sunday of Advent. In the Christian church, Advent is the period of time in which the body of Christ focuses on and celebrates the prophetic fulfillment and messianic arrival of the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. Embodied within this period of expectation and fulfillment are the spirits of cleansing, healing, hope, joy and love. It is purposeful and significant because Advent reminds us that the Savior came to heal the entire world, regardless of one's condition or the depth of one's need, and, as we await his return, we are to exemplify healing, hope, joy and love in the world.

The marriage of Advent and World AIDS Day offers the Church the opportunity to fulfill one of its primary purposes in the world--that of serving as the light of Christ and a beacon of hope to the peoples of the world. Advent is certainly a time when the world should be able to see the love of Christ in the Church. It is a time when all divisions should cease, and only the love of Christ should be reflected. All else, whether liturgically based or worldly created, is false. He is love and love conquers all.

Thus, it is neither strange nor unscriptural that the Church would take a leadership role in fighting the spread of AIDS, along with all of its attendant harms. Advent tells us that Jesus was sent for this very purpose, and that he will return to judge the world and the Church on how well we have actively carried out his message of love. Advent also tells us that the Church's own healing cannot come, unless it is willing to partner with and work for the healing of others. Advent is not a time to play church--it is a time to be the Church. Woe unto us if we miss such a moment!

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 2 Samuel 21:1-14**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

HIV/AIDS is shrouded in stigma and shame. Stigma is considered a key factor in the spread of HIV/AIDS. Recently, a colleague from the public sector brazenly showed me a photograph of an Alabama Baptist church's statement on AIDS. On its mall sized marquis its statement read in bold letters, *AIDS is God's curse on homosexuals*. What hurt most, upon seeing the marquis, was that I could not share with my colleague that the marquis was in front of the cross that hung from the front of the church. I could not share my righteous indignation with a non-believer, that the marquis' message stood out and covered the message of the Cross. Salvation: a death of a savior now risen, once and for all. That once again, in the age of HIV/AIDS, stigma and shame obscured the opportunity to set the captives free, shrouded the love and compassion of God. However, in using the scripture reading, 2 Samuel 21:1-14, the Church has the opportunity to take the lead to strip shame and its power of complacency, to dismantle stigma and its silent screams.

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

The text is not placed in chronological order and may have taken place during David's early reign. Its chronological placement is better suited just prior to 2 Samuel 9, where Mephibosheth is presumed to be the sole survivor of the House of Saul. In addition, Shimei's accusation of David's guilt concerning the house of Saul in 2 Samuel 16:7-8 may well refer to the events described in this reading.

The narrative begins in the third year of famine. The people are allowed to consume the seeds. This represents the year of final hope or postponed death.

David seeks the face of the LORD looking for hope and discovers that Saul is guilty of shedding the blood of the Gibeonites. We first hear of the Gibeonites during their trickery to gain favor among the leaders of Israel in Joshua 9. Joshua enters into a peace treaty with them, and the Gibeonites are spared. Part of the agreement is that Gibeonites would serve in a shrine in Gibeah (later this area would be Saul's birthplace). Despite the evidence mounting against Saul as a leader, the story of the massacre is never told before now, although some believe Saul may have massacred the Gibeonites to seize their land.

David seeks the Gibeonites, instead of God, for a resolution (v. 2). He allows himself an out and provides an opportunity to be seen as tricked (vv. 3-6) by a people known to Israel as tricksters: "What do you say that I should do for you?" "Bless the heritage" (v. 4) is an expression for making reconciliation. This seems to be more of a military maneuver to destroy any chance of opposition to his kingship from the House of Saul. Mephibosheth, who has a varying ability (2 Samuel 9:3), is not perceived as a military threat.

The Gibeonites' desire to impale (v. 6) the sons of Saul creates some concern for me as a reader. The Hebrew term here is difficult to translate. This term may describe an early form of crucifixion, hanging, and/or dismemberment associated with a cultic practice. One wonders why David would agree to sacrifice (v. 6) the seven and allow them to be left shamefully exposed in a religious practice as a way to absolve guilt and for God to bring them rain and hope.

The bodies hung at the mountain (Rock of Gibeah) in shame over six months, April, "barley harvest," (vv. 9-10) to October/November, "until it rained." Ironically, Saul's seed is consumed in this year. After the act of retribution, there is still no rain, no hope; not for the sons, not for the people of the land, not for David.

Surprisingly, the scriptures named (v. 8) the two mothers in the story, Rizpah and Merab. Merab's presence is suspiciously absent after her initial mention. Rizpah is the only one who steps into the role as accountability agent and compassionate catalyst. Her name means a hot glowing coal/stone, creating images of the purifying coals found in heaven in Isaiah 6.<sup>2</sup>

One first meets Rizpah in 2 Samuel 3 during a conflict involving Ishbaal and Abner as the concubine pawn in a power struggle. Rizpah's spirituality is often reduced to the sexual roles defined by popular culture then and now: concubine material with no political clout, having had Kings Saul (v. 11), Ishbaal, Abner, and possibly David lay with her; daughter/property of Aiah (vv. 8, 10, 11); and mother (v. 8). Her emotions are often defined in disempowering terms: "wild with grief," "helpless," and "lonely" in her vigil.

She takes up or seizes the sackcloth with the same force in which David seizes her sons to purge (v. 2) the guilt (same Hebrew word in v. 10 and v. 8). She is mother, second wife, and a woman. But she is also the symbol of Christ's love for those that have to live and die in a cloud of shame. Rev. Jacqueline McCullough describes her as a woman with "tremendous commitment" and "dogged tenacity." In spite of the shame she experiences, she promotes the "glory and purpose of God" beyond her personal life. She is not just concerned for her two sons but, for five others that she did not bear.

Armed with sackcloth (v. 10), a token of mourning, Rizpah takes action to relieve her community of hypocritical religious duty. She is a symbol of righteous defiance, fueled by the shame savagely plastered to her door, who chooses justice and compassion.

She takes the lead to strip the shame surrounding bloodguilt; a shame that immobilized a whole community into complacency. She takes the lead to dismantle the silent screams of stigma. After months of silence, people began to whisper. They whispered loud enough and in the right places that the King, the government, heard and responded (v. 11). King David, upon hearing of her vigil responds by gathering the bones and bodies of the dead, exposed to the world in shame and stigma, and burying them. It is not until this occurs that God heeds (v. 14) their supplication for the land. She could not undo their death or the action that led to their death. However, she was the catalyst for future action.

## **Challenge**

In the spirit of Rizpah, we can take the lead. AIDS is the leading cause of death among African Americans aged 25 - 44. We cannot bring back the hundreds of thousands of people who have died, but we can counter the *misinformation* concerning AIDS and God's judgment, the shame that shrouds AIDS-related deaths in our community. Those who died are Rizpah's children. They are our children. We can take the lead to ensure no one else dies. With sackcloth, we can destroy the condemnation, stigma and shame associated with the people living with HIV.

Do you have your sackcloth? Ready? Set? Go!

### **Descriptive Details**

Sounds: The buzz of swarming winged insects; flapping of cloth in the wind; beaks picking at flesh; a mirage of food and water from a sleep deprived woman; screams as sons are impaled; the hammering of the impaled bodies; footsteps as David walks through the palace;

Sights: A cloak of shame shrouding the bodies of the seven sons of the community; people covering the eyes of their young ones as they walk past the bodies; dried blood plastered to the bodies of the sons; flies crawling in and out of the facial crevices of the persons who are dying, sons helplessly fighting off the Gibeonites; women holding Rizpah back; tears from Rizpah as she stands guard; birds perched waiting for opportune moment to descend on the rotting flesh; Rizpah grabbing an earth colored sackcloth from a bushel of cloths and running for the door; birds distracting Rizpah while others descend to pick at the flesh; Rizpah startled out of a light sleep by the sounds of the animals devouring the sons' flesh;

Smells: The stench of baked blood; the odor of a women sitting at a rock for six months in the sun; rotting flesh burning under the hot sun; stale odor of goat's hair which is part of the fabric of the sackcloth;

Textures: The coarse feel of the sackcloth; the hard uncomfortable rock; dry, flaking sunburned flesh; and

Taste: The paste of plaque on Rizpah's tongue; grit of the desert sand; and salty tears dripping down Rizpah's face.

### **III. Other Material for the Sermonic Moment**

- Ten thousand, one hundred and twenty nine (10,129) is the number of young people between the ages of 13–24, who died under the cloud of stigma and shame associated with AIDS, from 1983-2004. Ten thousand one hundred twenty nine. These are Rizpah's children. These are our children, who have died under the shame and stigma of AIDS.
- Stigma and shame are primary factors that spread HIV in the African American community. Stigma causes immobilization and silence. As a result of stigma, people delay testing for HIV, delay medical treatment, do not disclose their HIV status, increase violence toward people who are HIV positive, and promote discrimination.
- Ubuntu: originates from a Zulu concept of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* - which means "a person is only a person through other people." Literally, in English, it means "I am, because we are." Archbishop Desmond Tutu's identification with ubuntu has given rise to the idea of "ubuntu theology" - where ethical responsibility comes with a shared identity. If someone is hungry, the ubuntu response is that we're all collectively responsible. "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours."<sup>3</sup>

### **IV. Church Resources**

- **The Black AIDS Institute** ([blackAIDS.org](http://blackAIDS.org)) is a nonprofit organization and the first black HIV/AIDS policy center dedicated to reducing HIV/AIDS health disparities by mobilizing black institutions and individuals in efforts to confront the epidemic in their communities. Their motto describes a commitment to self-preservation: "Our People, Our Problem, Our Solution."

- **The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC.Gov/HIV)** offers information and statistics concerning HIV/AIDS among African Americans. There you can also find out more about the new initiative called The Heightened National Response to the HIV/AIDS Crisis among African Americans.

The CDC **National Prevention Information Network (NPIN)** is the US reference, referral, and distribution service for information on HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and tuberculosis (TB). NPIN produces, collects, catalogs, processes, stocks, and disseminates materials and information on HIV/AIDS, STDs, and TB to organizations and people working in those disease fields in international, national, state, and local settings. Online location: <http://www.cdcnpin.org/scripts/index.asp> accessed 15 March 2008

- Additional resources can be found in the Cultural Resources unit and the Worship Resources unit for this day on the African American Lectionary calendar.

### Notes

1. For more information on the campaign consult World Aids Campaign. Online location: <http://www.worldaidscampaign.info/> accessed 15 January 2008; or U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services. HIV/Awareness Days. Online location:

<http://www.hhs.gov/aidsawarenessdays/days/world/index.html>, accessed 1 March 2008.

2. Brenner, Athalya. I Am....: Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005. p. 121.

3. See South Africa History online location:

<http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/special%20projects/tutu-d/timeline-tutu.html>. accessed 15 March 2008. AIDS is a collective issue, not an “us” and “them” issue. If one person has AIDS in our community, we all have AIDS.