

**From Rizpah to Rittenhouse: We Are More or Less the Same ... and the Fighter Still Remains  
Reign of Divine Love Sunday, November 21, 2021, 11:30 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena  
The Rev. Mike Kinman**

*“Now the years are rolling by me  
They are rockin’ evenly  
I am older than I once was  
And younger than I’ll be  
But that’s not unusual  
Nor is it strange  
After changes upon changes  
We are more or less the same  
After changes  
We are more or less the same.”*

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It was 52 years ago, in 1969, another year the world felt like it was being torn apart, that Paul Simon wrote “The Boxer.”

It had been a year since Dr. King had been murdered and President Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968.

Richard Nixon had been elected president, and White America was trying to pretend that the problems of race and poverty that had so disturbingly and inconveniently reared their heads throughout the 1960s had been dealt with sufficiently. That the silent majority that wanted law and order had won.

Nixon and others had effectively used two of the most historic weapons empire uses against those dare to stand up against its injustice – shame and fear.

Protesters – not only against racial injustice and the Viet Nam war but against violent persecution of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer persons in places like the Stonewall Inn -- were ridiculed and made into caricatures in the media even as the batons were raining down on their heads.

We were mere months past Richard Daley’s police thugs beating protesters on live TV at the 1968 Democratic National Convention and months away from four dead in Ohio.

Police and military violence was on the rise against protesters and poor black and brown and queer people and most of White America was just fine with that.

The message was clear. If you stand up to protest you will be shamed and you may be shot.

And those who shame and shoot you have the full backing and protection of the government of the United States of America.

Now, Paul Simon probably wasn't thinking about this when he wrote The Boxer. As it is for so many of us, it wasn't just what was happening in the world that left him feeling battered and alone, but things happening in his own life.

And that's a piece of the puzzle, too.

Because Empire depends on our humanity. Empire preys on our humanity.

Empire depends on the preoccupation of the people with our own concerns, griefs and troubles -- and that's human.

Empire counts on the exhaustion of the people with our own lives -- and that's human.

Empire counts on the fact that if it makes standing up for justice just a little harder, just a little scarier, just a little more shaming ... then we will back off because frankly, things are truly already more than hard, more than scary and we are already more than afraid that the shaming gaze of the crowd might be turned on us.

Empire feeds us poetic lies that make us feel powerful and right, that harden into conventional wisdom that justify our inaction and turn us from the shamed into the shamers, from protesters into pawns.

Empire doesn't count on us being evil ... just on us being tired and human.

Empire counts on it just getting too hard for us to resist.

*And so, we squander our resistance for a pocketful of mumbles, such are promises.  
All lies and jest, still we all hear what we want to hear and disregard the rest.*

It's interesting that the verse I opened with wasn't in the cut of The Boxer that came out on the Bridge Over Troubled Water album. Paul Simon was probably speaking of himself ... and he was truly speaking of all of us when he sang

*After changes upon changes  
We are more or less the same  
After changes  
We are more or less the same.*

Friday's verdict allowing Kyle Rittenhouse, a private citizen carrying an AR-15, to walk free after murdering two unarmed people protesting for black lives, is nothing new. It is not only not surprising it is entirely predictable.

It is Page One of the Playbook of Empire – Shame and Fear.

Paint protesters as disturbed, lawless, uncivilized, violent deviants so “good people” will be ashamed to be associated with them ... and kill enough of them publicly so people will be afraid to join them in the streets.

Shame and fear. These are ancient practices. As old as our Gospel reading this morning ... and, as we will discover ... far older than that.

Today is traditionally called the Feast of Christ the King. Years ago, All Saints changed our observance to calling it the Reign of Divine Love. Whichever name we use, the story we tell this day is about the power of shame and fear ... and about a power greater still. It is about the Rule of Empire and the Reign of Love. It is an ancient story. And it is as fresh as this morning’s headlines.

Jesus had become dangerous to the state by doing the one thing the state fears most – revealing the truth in love about its own injustice.

You see, we are created in the image of God ... and that means we are created good and our hearts want to be good. Our hearts crave justice. And the only way systems of injustice are able to endure is when the people are either too afraid to stand up or too ashamed of our own complicity in and addiction to the injustice that we believe the lies spun for us because we are just too tired, and the truth is just too difficult to bear.

And then comes Jesus ... God as one of us to show us all who we can be if truly we believe that God dwells in us and everyone else.

And Jesus loves without bounds.

Jesus names the injustice.

Jesus has the audacity to imagine a world that is different. A world that is just.

Jesus gathers crowds and says, “wake up, children ... it doesn’t have to be this way.”

Jesus brings hope ... and hope is a dangerous thing not just for the systems we hope to dismantle but for those of us who dare to hope ourselves.

Because hope dashed is a fearful thing.

Hope dashed is a painful thing.

Hope dashed makes us afraid ever to hope again.

And so, Empire sets out to smother the hope of Jesus – not just in him but in the people who are beginning to rally around him. And Empire uses its two most trusted weapons – shame and fear.

Jesus is arrested – shame and fear. If you are arrested you must have done something wrong, you must be bad.  
Shame.

If you are arrested, terrible things can happen to you.  
Prison. Torture. Death.  
Fear.

Jesus is ridiculed. They mockingly call him a king and put a crown of thorns and robe on him.  
Shame.

Jesus is savagely beaten and spat on. The pain is immense.  
Fear.

Jesus is marched through the streets and stripped naked.  
Shame.

Finally, Jesus is crucified. His body held aloft by nails that tear into his flesh but killed by suffocation when his legs can no longer push his body up enough to take a breath.  
Fear.

And even after death, the bodies are often left on the crosses for days, weeks, or months as birds and wild animals tear into the dead flesh.

Left as a sign the way heads of traitors on pikes were put on the tower bridge in London,

...the way the bodies of indigenous people fighting for their land were displayed outside towns in the old west,

...the way dismembered, burned, lynched black bodies were left swinging on trees in the south,

... the way Mike Brown's body was left on hot asphalt for four and a half hours,

... the way police and vigilante white supremacists are allowed to kill and walk away free

... as a sign that if you step out of line, this will happen to you.

Shame.

Fear.

These are the weapons of Empire.

Jesus' crucifixion.

Our celebration this day of the Reign of Divine Love.

These things make it clear on whose side Jesus stands.

The Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas writes:

*“Jesus’ crucifixion indicates God’s unwavering solidarity with the crucified peoples of the world, making it unmistakably clear that these lives matter to God. Even more, the crucified Jesus’ resurrection reveals that it is only when the sacred dignity of those whose lives are most beset by crucifying violence is restored, that the justice of God can be realized.”*

And then she asks a question:

*“What does all of this mean for doing theology in our twenty-first century world?”<sup>1</sup>*

If we are among the oppressed and the crucified already, certainly it means remembering that Jesus is with you, that the power of love that is ultimately greater than the power of shame and fear is on your side.

That your lives do indeed matter greatly.

That there is a hope that even the most brutal injustice and death cannot quench.  
And what of the rest of us?

What of all of us together?

What of us as the church?

*“What does all of this mean for doing theology ... for us living theology ... in our twenty first century world?”*

I want to offer one possible starting place. And for it, we need to reach back even further ... much further ... than the Gospel story we heard today.

Jesus’ crucifixion is not the first or only crucifixion in our scripture. A thousand years before, at the beginning of the reign of King David, there were more.

And to tell that story, I need to introduce you to a remarkable woman named Rizpah. Rizpah lived in the court of King Saul, where she was one of the king’s concubines ... which is polite language that means she was sexually assaulted at the king’s whim at any time and place of his choosing. Her life was a life of trauma, with no end in sight.

When Saul died, David became king and soon after came several years of famine. God told David that it was because of how Saul had treated the Gibeonites and restitution was needed.

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<sup>1</sup> From an Introduction to “A Womanist Looks at the Future Direction of Theological Discourse” by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas in the Anglican Theological Review 100.3 - <http://www.anglicantheologicalreview.org/100-3-douglas/>

So, David went to the Gibeonites and asked them what it would take to make things right and they said that seven sons of Saul needed to be handed over to them for execution.

David, hoping this would stop the famine, handed over seven of Saul's sons ... two of which, Armoni and Meshibosheph (say their names) ... were Rizpah's children as well.

Knowing the power of shame and fear, the Gibeonites did not execute them privately ... but stripped them naked and crucified them on a hill for everyone to see.

Warning – this could happen to you.

And it worked. The people were afraid. They didn't want any chance of this happening to them.

The people were ashamed and afraid and so they turned their backs on that hill. Tried to pretend it wasn't there. Went back to their busy, hard daily lives.

Except for one woman.

And it is here that Rizpah enters the story.

Up until now, the story had been about kings and nations and the power games they played. Games of life and death. But now, as the scene shifts to that lonely hill and those seven bodies on the crosses, we see this lone, seemingly powerless dark-skinned woman, Rizpah, trudging slowly up the hill, weighed down as much by her years of trauma as her devastating grief.

She walks to the base of the crosses and spreads sackcloth on the ground, preparing to mourn alone as the rest of the people turn their backs.

All she has is her grief ... except ... she does have one more thing.

She has her determination. She is determined to stay on that hill for as long as it takes for the bodies of not only her sons but of all the crucified to be treated with dignity, to be acknowledged as human, to be given the burials they deserve.

For Rizpah knows "that it is only when the sacred dignity of those whose lives are most beset by crucifying violence is restored, that the justice of God can be realized."

Second Samuel tells us Rizpah remains there *"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"* (2 Sm 21:10)

South African theologian Allan Boesak paints an even more vivid picture:

*"Rizpah is running from cross to cross, from body to body, looking everywhere: to the heavens for the carrion birds and along the ground for the predators. Her resistance is so fierce and so*

*relentless that not a single beast and not a single bird can touch, maim, or damage those bodies on the crosses.*

*“And know this, Rizpah looks up and she does not see crosses, she sees bodies on crosses. Unlike David, she is not objectifying (them). She does not see sacrifices for the sake of peace; she sees cold-blooded murder.*

*“For her it is not just a political spectacle or even a national disgrace. It is a human tragedy. It is not only indignity and shame heaped upon the people on the crosses; it is an assault upon the dignity and worthiness of God.*

*“...As she fights against the beasts of the field, she fights at the same time against the beasts in the palace—those men who rule, who have decided they have power, like God, over the lives and the deaths of these young (people). ...*

*“Rizpah, by her act of love and solidarity, releases us, reading this story, from the paralyzing power of the king and the mortifying grip of expedient sacrifice into the freedom of sacrificial resistance.*

*“She completely claims our attention: away from the centers of power to the margins of suffering and righteousness. She does not remain in the coolness of the palace, in the shadow of the throne, but under those crosses she exposes herself to the burning sun. That's where her commitment lies. That's where her solidarity comes to life.”<sup>2</sup>*

Finally, David relents and agrees to take the bodies down and bury them according to scriptural mandate. And it is only then that the famine ends ... so it is not the brutality of David and the Gibeonites but the heroism of Rizpah that finally brings redemption to the people and healing to the land.

And there is one more thing about Rizpah ... throughout her entire vigil ... not once did anybody join her.

And while that is heroism for her, it is an invitation for us.

Because Rizpah is out there still. Right now.

As the empires of the world continue to crucify, and as Jesus continues to hang on the cross with the crucified peoples of the world, with every body there is a mother, a lover, a sibling, a friend who cannot stop the tears, who cannot let the body continue to hang there, who is a

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted from [Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism](https://www.left-bank.com/book/9781570759765) -- by Allan Boesak and Curtiss De Young. You can buy it here - <https://www.left-bank.com/book/9781570759765>

member of that club nobody ever wanted to join who is keeping lonely vigil demanding not only justice but basic humanity for the body they love and long for and grieve.

One who is driven by the conviction “that it is only when the sacred dignity of those whose lives are most beset by crucifying violence is restored, that the justice of God can be realized.”

If we are not Rizpah already, that is our invitation ... to join Rizpah on that hill.  
That's where our solidarity comes to life.

The court told us on Friday what we already knew. What we have known for generations unto millennia.

Just as we have moved from enslavement to mass incarceration, we have moved from crucifixion to lynching to extrajudicial executions by police and vigilante enforcement of white supremacy.

*After changes upon changes, we are more or less the same.  
After changes, we are more or less the same.*

The court told us what we already knew. The world is not safe if you have black or brown skin. Expect no police officer to spare you. Expect no court to protect you.

This is state-sponsored and state-sanctioned terrorism.

It has an ancient history.

They used it against Armoni, Meshibosheph and Jesus and they are using it today.

It's been three thousand years since Rizpah kept her lonely vigil on that hill and bent a king to her will. Her body has long since gone down to the dust ... and yet she is the mother of movements and she calls to us still.

Rizpah is the boxer of whom Paul Simon sings, a fighter by her trade, and she carries the reminders of every glove that laid her down or cut her 'til she cried out in her anger or her shame. Rizpah has long since left us ... but the fighter still remains.

She has many names:

Lezley McSpadden,  
Cooper Jones,  
Tamika Palmer,  
Sybrina Fulton  
Samaria Rice

... perhaps you recognize more their children's names –

Michael Brown,  
Ahmaud Arbery,  
Breonna Taylor,  
Trayvon Martin,  
Tamir Rice.

If we are to follow Jesus, there can be only one response - not just to admire Rizpah from afar but to join her on that hill of crosses, refusing to let her keep vigil alone. To trust and proclaim that empire's weapons of shame and fear will not stand against us.

To not turn our backs on the bodies on the crosses but to face them, and join them and say with one voice

We will not back down.  
We will not abandon one another in fear.  
We will not stay silent.

You may shame us.  
You may imprison us.  
You may shoot us.  
You may kill us.  
But you will not stop us.

We will stand with and love one another until all are treated with dignity.

We will stand with and love one another until all God's children are free. Amen.