

## Ancient Words Ever True

### *Preamble to the Readings.*

Marking the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Apology to Institutional Victims and Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse is difficult. We need to speak of challenging and painful experiences. While the Royal Commission was limited to institutional child sexual abuse most abuse occurs in domestic environments. 14% of Australian Adults have experiences childhood sexual abuse (18% of women and 11% of men). 41% of Australian adults have experiences physical or sexual violence since the age of 15.<sup>1</sup> 1 in 2 LGBTIQ+ people have been sexually assaulted.<sup>2</sup> Beyond gender-based violence, across the world conflict is at its highest levels since World War II.<sup>3</sup> We are witnessing environmental trauma a consequence of climate change. According to the World Health Organisation, 70% of people worldwide experience one or more traumas in their lifetime.<sup>4</sup> These are just not statistics, they are the experiences of our mothers, fathers, lovers, children and grandchildren, siblings, neighbours, work colleagues, friends and millions of others we don't know personally. Such trauma, disproportionately affects those with least power—children, women, Queer folk, First Nations People and People of Colour, economically disadvantaged, displaced people, those differently abled etc. Trauma is not just an individual problem. It is a social problem. And an ecclesial one!

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021-22), [Childhood abuse](https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/childhood-abuse/2021-22), accessed 11 June 2025, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/childhood-abuse/2021-22>.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, “Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence: LGBTIQ,” accessed 11 June 2025, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/population-groups/lgbtiqa-people>.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, “With Highest Number of Violent Conflicts Since Second World War, United Nations Must Rethink Efforts to Achieve, Sustain Peace, Speakers Tell Security Council,” 26 January 2023, accessed 11 June 2025, [press.un.org/en/2023/sc15184.doc.htm](https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15184.doc.htm)

<sup>4</sup> Benjet, C. et al. Psychol Med. 2016 Jan;46(2):327-43. Ronald C. Kessler et al., “Trauma and PTSD in the WHO World Mental Health Surveys,” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 8, no. sup5 (2017): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2017.1353383>. Australian figures are higher with 75% of adults reporting a traumatic event at some point in their life. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024) [Stress and trauma](https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/types-of-violence/child-sexual-abuse). Collecting robust data is difficult and it is generally acknowledged that given the sensitivity of the issues, there is likely to be under reporting. Comparability of data is further complicated because to the variety of data gathering methods used. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/types-of-violence/child-sexual-abuse>, Accessed 30 January, 2025.

Many who come here on Sundays bring their own lived or living experience of trauma. I say living, because for some the past is alive in the present and continues to overwhelm. Serene Jones, the current president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, asks, how would a preacher preach if they were able to see the scars and wounds of those in the congregation? Would they preach differently? In my PhD research I am asking how, as a congregation, our liturgies, pastoral care and administrative practices can be aware of and sensitive to the life experiences of those who come. We must not ignore or silence the voices of those battered and bruised by trauma.

We also need to recognise our biblical texts are full of examples perpetuating or colluding with violence and abuse. Abraham was asked by God to sacrifice his and Sarah's son, Lot offered his daughters to the Sodomites, God sent plagues upon the Egyptians, innocent babies were slaughtered by Herod, Jesus was stripped, whipped and hung on a cross to die. The list goes on. Feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible refers to the stories of rape in the bible as "texts of terror."<sup>5</sup>

In our second reading this morning we will hear a story that could rightly be called a text of terror. Depending on the bible translation used it has been titled as David Avenges the Gibeonites,<sup>6</sup> Justice for the Gibeonites,<sup>7</sup> and The Great Famine and the Execution of Saul's descendants.<sup>8</sup> I warn you it is a gruesome story,

*Pause.*

Please stand as you are able and join in the singing of the hymn, "Ancient Words," before we listen to the cry of the persistent widow from a story told by Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Luke.

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<sup>5</sup> "Texts of Terror" is a phrase coined by Phyllis Trible to describe terrible stories in the bible involving violence perpetrated against women. Rhiannon Graybill intentionally describes such stories as "fuzzy, messy, icky" stories. Rhiannon Graybill, *Texts After Terror: Rape, Sexual Violence, and the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 3, 11–13.

<sup>6</sup> NLT, ESV, KJV, NRSV.

<sup>7</sup> CSB

<sup>8</sup> JB

***Reflection following the Readings.***

**Liz:** I warned you, the story for the second book of Samuel is a gruesome story! Let's see what the story has to offer as we mark the anniversary of the National Apology. Mighty King David wanted to end the famine so approaches God. As the story is told, God suggested the genocide committed by Saul needed to be addressed. The Gibeonites at first refuse retaliation, but when pressed, they ask for the blood of Saul's descendants. David readily agrees and hands over seven males to be killed, conveniently eliminating any rivals who could threaten his claim to power. But notice the famine did not end at this point. Such retributive violence, often misnamed as justice, plays out in our families, neighbourhoods and nations.

**Liz:** I now invite Rizpah to come forward and share her story.

**Rizpah:** I am Rizpah, my father was Aiah, and I was a secondary wife of Saul, a member of the Royal household, not a concubine as often assumed. My children were legitimate and entitled to inheritance, and they were potential heirs to the throne.<sup>9</sup> My two sons, Armoni and Mephibosheth were brutally killed along with Merab's sons. Following their slaughter, I also lost my status in Saul's dynasty. I was left economically and socially vulnerable. In my anguish I was speechless, but I needed to mourn the loss of my sons and protect their dignity even in death. For six months I kept vigil. I could not forsake my children.

The women from the village came to support me, to provide me with food and encouragement. They are not mentioned in the story, but I would not have survived for six months if I was alone.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, and it took six months,

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<sup>9</sup> Wilda Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, First edition (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 199–200. This interpretation is also supported by Melanchthon, fn 14, in Melanchthon, "Reading Rizpah Across Borders, Cultures, Belongings...all the Way to India," 178. Some argue against this (Ref required).

<sup>10</sup> Melanchthon asks about the role of the community and in particular the women in supporting Rizpah. Melanchthon, "Reading Rizpah Across Borders, Cultures, Belongings...all the Way to India," 181.

King David heard of my vigil. So, he goes and retrieves the bones of Saul and Jonathon, who like these seven young, slaughtered men, have not been honoured in death. Finally he comes to me and together we gave a dignified burial to all nine men in the tomb of my father-in-law at Kish.

Then, and only after the burial, did the rains come and the country ravaged by famine began to flourish.

**Liz:** I now invite the nameless widow in the parable Jesus tells in today's Gospel, to come forward. Let me call her Tikvah, a Hebrew girl's name for hope. Tikvah, as you have listened to Rizpah how have you heard her story.

**Tikvah:** Usually I'm referred to as the persistent widow demanding justice, but I am Tikvah. It's often assumed the justice I am seeking is related to my status as a widow. That **could** be the case as Jesus didn't specify in his parable. But my concerns for justice go beyond my own personal circumstances. Today I've been so deeply moved by Rizpah's story and her tenacious and formidable call for justice.

*Turning to Rizpah.*

Rizpah, I can't imagine your suffering. Your two sons and Merab's five, were as human sacrifice, supposedly in atonement to appease God for King Saul's violent genocide. What God would require such violent retribution to solve the evils of the world?

We didn't hear Rizpah, we **saw** your intense and public expression of grief. A large boulder gave you safety and security.<sup>11</sup> You lay down sackcloth, a symbol of your grief and gave a passionate testimony of your trauma and pain. For six months you stood in vigil day and night honouring yours and Merab's

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<sup>11</sup> Joo argues that the translation of *ha-tour* as "rock" is misleading; rather, it refers to a boulder, large enough to hold a woman, encamped for months. Joo, "Counter-Narratives: Rizpah and the 'Comfort Women' Statue," 95.

sons through your powerful ritual of mourning.<sup>12</sup> With screams and tears you told your truth through your body and voice.

**Rizpah:** I had no words! But I could not let this atrocity pass in dishonour.

*Pause.*

**Tikvah:** Rizpah, what happened to Merab, Saul's daughter, your stepdaughter. Her sons were forcibly taken from her by David then handed over to the Gibeonites for ritual slaughter in atonement for Sauls' genocide. In the story we hear nothing from Merab.

**Rizpah:** Ah, yes, Tikvah, Merab remained forever silent. Like other victims of violence and traumatic wounding she carries her ongoing suffering in silence, forgotten and hidden from view, as do the Merabs in our families, neighbourhoods and congregations, with their wounds continuing to fester.

*Pause*

**Tikvah:** I'm curious about something else. Many translations of the bible have different titles added to the story. None of them reference you, Rizpah. Is this yet another example of how our sacred texts silence the voices and the actions of women?

**Rizpah:** You may be right, Tikvah. I wonder how many people here today have ever heard of Rizpah before today? I wonder about the ongoing consequences, not only for faith communities but also for society more widely, if the biblical narratives are used uncritically. We need to reinterpret our sacred texts in our current time and context.

**Tikvah:** And that is what we are doing today.

**Liz:** Thank you, Tikvah, Thank you Rizpah.

*The two women embrace*

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<sup>12</sup> Sharon A. Buttry and Daniel Buttry, *Daughters of Rizpah: Nonviolence and the Transformation of Trauma*, with Molly Truman Marshall (Cascade Books, 2020), 41.

What does this story, some 3000 years after it was first told, offer us, as we like Tikvah, want justice—not just policies, procedures and training to prevent future harm—but to attend to the wounds of the battered and bruised in our congregation, our homes, nations and across the world. Drawing on six decades of interdisciplinary trauma scholarship and more than 25 years of trauma theological scholarship I have developed a trauma sensitive lens consisting of five elements: trust, truth, love, justice and hope: cultivating trust, witnessing truth, fostering love, pursuing justice and nurturing hope.

Over the last half of 2024, eleven people from the congregation participated in a contemplative theological inquiry to guide a trauma-sensitive practice of hospitality in this congregation and beyond. Very briefly, sitting in circle and listening to each other with open minds, open hearts and open wills, what we learnt was far greater than the sum of the individual contributions. The circle process offered a model for engaging in difficult conversations communally. From a theological perspective, we recognised our desire to welcome all, but that we cannot welcome all. Hospitality necessarily has boundaries for reason of safety, capacity and identity. Not impenetrable boundaries, but boundaries, nevertheless. We recognised forgiveness is widely seen as a Christian virtue, but too little attention is given to justice when harm is done, not retributive justice but justice to set things right, or as right as possible. There was no doubting we are made in the image of God, and all have inherent dignity, but how do we respond when dignity is violated? What are the consequences when dignity is squandered? I have also collated the many suggestions offered to foster a culture of Just Hospitality underpinned by an ethos of dignity and justice.

Let me conclude with some wonderings. If instead of reading both the story in the second book of Samuel and the parable of Jesus as stories about individuals some thousands of years ago, what can these stories offer us if we

read and interpret them in our time and context?<sup>13</sup> What if we understood them as stories about communities, and in particular the faith community of Pitt Street Uniting Church? Could these stories offer us a way of speaking of and practicing trauma-sensitive hospitality, allowing us to take seriously not only the experience of those living with trauma, but the lived/living experiences of pain and suffering amid this community? How can we listen to and learn from the Rizpah's and the Tikvah's among us and thus offer just hospitality.

*Pause.*

And beyond Pitt St, are we seeing Rizpah in action today among those who are lamenting and protesting for those in Gaza?

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<sup>13</sup> Rambo invites us to engage with biblical texts in the Jewish Midrash tradition, as well as the consider the original language an, the historical context and its reception history. Most of which has necessarily been glossed over in the context of this Sunday reflection. The Seattle School, "The Spirit's Witness: An Interview with Shelly Rambo," *The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology*, October 29, 2015, <https://theseattleschool.edu/blog/shelly-rambo-interview/>.