

The Land Defiled

By Rev. Loren McGrail

“We would have needed bigger hearts to contain all this tragedy.”

—*Muhammed Abu Khdeir’s mother*

“Perhaps the most important reason for lamenting is that it helps us to realize our oneness with all things, to know all things are our relatives.”

—*Black Elk*

“Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.”

—*Confucius*

I have been meditating, praying, and festering about how to talk about the death of 16 year old Muhammed Abu Khdeir, who died on my daughter’s birthday, June 29th. His death has signaled not just a new low in moral or criminal behavior but a fire of resistance both frightening and inspiring.

Friday was his funeral in Shuafat. It was also the first Friday in Ramadan and only men over 50 were allowed to pray at the mosque, forcing most to pray in the streets. I stood with them praying for God to show up and stop this murderous rampage. I prayed for God’s arms to enfold all the families, especially the mothers. I took photos of the soldiers in their riot gear ready for an attack. I was aware I might be taking the “before” pictures. I noted the snipers above closed Herod’s gate, the Israeli flags flying around the new settlement above the post office. I paid attention to the eerie quiet and watched the soldier with the camera recording everything and everyone. The revolution may not be televised but it will be documented and used by both sides. My own small act of resistance was to wear my black and white embroidered keffiyah. It was duly noted as a sign of solidarity by the smiles on the faces of the worshippers and people on the street.

While these faithful were kneeling on the hot cement in the recently bloodied streets of Jerusalem, others attended the funeral in Shuafat to show respect for Palestine’s newest martyr. Following the funeral there were clashes in the streets as was expected not only there but all over Palestine including my neighborhood of Wadi Al Joz, where another youth was kidnapped and beaten right before dawn again on his way to gather food for breaking the fast.

As I take in the facts of this unfolding and unending horror story, I am searching how to make sense of this latest tragedy that involves again kidnapping and murder. The story is so twisted it is hard to follow or know where to begin. But it involves deceit and cover ups and grieving parents. Some say we need to go back to 1948 because it is yet another part of the ongoing Nakba. Others say this chapter of escalated violence begins with the murder of the two youth on May 15th up near Nablus caught on CCTV cameras—innocent Palestinian youths attending their first protest rally. Others say it begins with the kidnapping and now murder of three Israeli youth just outside Hebron. Others say it is all about attacking the new Unity government and in particular a way to go after Hamas which is why the bombings of Gaza have also increased. The common elements are youth, kidnapping, and murder.

My mother's heart breaks open after each reported kidnapping, assault, or murder. My theological mind keeps circling for some sacred story for explanation or comfort. Vengeance is mine says the Lord is a mantra I wish others would listen to. There is one story that I keep cycling back to and that is the relatively unknown story of Rizpah from 2 Samuel. I had the deep pleasure of hearing pastor Allan Boesak from South Africa deliver this sermon back in Chicago at Wellington Ave UCC, my home church, shortly before leaving for my mission: It was a sermon that connected this story of a grieving courageous woman to the mothers of Palestine. His interpretation and prophetic caution are helpful to me now and here.

In his sermon "The Dignity of Resistance in Solidarity: The Story of Rizpah," he talks about the idolatry of the palace or state that claims it has the right to determine life and death. He talks about what happens to people when you endanger the security of the state, how ritual killing becomes public and thus acceptable or threatening. In the story, Rizpah, the concubine of David, watches over seven bodies hanging on crosses on a hill. They have been crucified and left for all to see—for the beasts and carrion-eaters to devour. Rizpah's two sons are victims of this imperial show of force. She spreads out her sackcloth and cares for them all. Boesak sees a connection between mother Rizpah's vigil and the mothers of Palestine and I do too:

"The crosses upon which the bodies of the sons of Saul are hung are as visible as the crosses upon which the sons of Palestine are hanging, and the women and the children, because they dare to lay claim to the land, they dare to lay claim to the right to live, they dare to lay claim to the dignity of resistance."

Boesak reminds us that Rizpah cared for all the crucified ones, not just her two children. Her strong faith and solidarity show that she knew that what was in danger was not only the lives of her children but the soul of Israel itself. He tells us that she stood upon that

rock and underneath those crosses to fight for the dignity of those who died and for those who might live. She knew, he preached, that if the land is defiled by innocent blood it will lose its sacredness.

I come away from this story in awe of this little known biblical woman and wonder if I or we have the courage to do the same. Do we have the courage to risk, to protect our dead, all of them, until justice is delivered? Do we know that the land is defiled and its sacredness under suspicion at best? Are we willing to make ourselves vulnerable to the lynching crowds that cry for more blood?

I return back to the drama here. A few days ago we learned the Israeli youth from the settlements were not only dead but had been murdered and thrown in a ditch. We also learned that this happened shortly after the kidnapping. Some of us learned that there was a gag order that would not release this information and that most of this was caught in a taped phone conversation. My mother self flies into a rage against a state for withholding such evidence and allowing my parental rights to be so callously manipulated for political gain. I grieve with these mothers and families.

I am Rizpah and I am angry that my children's lives have become pawns in a game of power. I will make my sackcloth a shroud for them.

For three weeks Palestinians everywhere, including Gaza, have been attacked and murdered in a fury of righteous vengeance. Their homes have been demolished, their lives threatened, their roads and offices destroyed and closed. Every child and every child's mother fears kidnapping. They stay locked inside their homes and leave only when necessity demands it.

I am Rizpah and I am now all these Palestinian mothers fearful and grieving over the new crosses, the new lives being crucified daily. My sackcloth is not big enough to cover the pain and the shame.

Operation Brother's Keeper is the righteous justification given for this brutal collective punishment. The irony of the name is no more or less ironic or horrific than my country's Shock and Awe campaign against Iraqi citizens. So I try not to be too judgmental but rather am more ashamed by how religion is often used as a cover for murder.

In addition to the biblical narrative running through my mind, I am also pained by some of the re-occurring facts—children are being targeted in the early morning as they leave morning prayer or sent to buy food for *suhoor*, the meal before the fast of the day begins. Why does this detail amongst details bother me? Because I think the murder is

so intentional in taking advantage of people's faith rituals and vulnerability. It is no less heinous than murdering Archbishop Oscar Romero at the Communion Table. Its brutality is meant to shock and it succeeds.

Now because Muhammed's kidnappers were caught on CCTV tape there is evidence then that the state's inaction in responding to the kidnapping makes them directly responsible. This is Jerusalem not the West Bank and civil law applies here. The State is also complicit because its leaders, including Netanyahu, have called for collective punishment, which is against the Geneva Conventions and which has led to lynching mobs and more assaults and kidnapping of Palestinian youths. Even Muhammed's cousin was beaten up and arrested the next day for supposed stone throwing. The fact that he is an American citizen should not make his attack more notable. It shows rather the incredible racism Israel has toward all Arabs, including those with American passports.

In Islam it is important to bury your dead as soon as possible, preferably within three days. Friday was the fourth day. Reports are that the authorities would not release the body until his parents signed a document claiming his death was due to a family issue. Then the surveillance cameras documented the kidnapping on film and this was followed by an autopsy report that shows he was forced to drink fuel and was burned alive.

Muhammed was burned alive. He was alive when he was set on fire. And Israel has the audacity to shoot with live ammunition youths who set tires on fire? They have the brazenness to continue to assault Palestinians on the light rail and in the streets under the full watch and approval of its government? Why not? They have the world's blind eye to continue to arrest without charge hundreds of people a day.

Each night during Ramadan the youth take to the streets and the fireworks they stored for their religious celebrations now are used as weapons to be hurled at the soldiers invading their neighborhoods and communities. It is an asymmetrical defense. A David and Goliath battle. Both sides claim God is on their side.

And in Gaza the fighter planes I heard taking off during the day strike their targets, lighting up the night sky, sometimes up to 30 a night. Civilians are often wounded or killed during these attacks. Their names add to the list of those dead this month for the UN to report.

The hill is crowded with crosses and there are not enough Rizpahs to take care of the all the rotting bodies. Some come but only attend to those they claim as their own. Most don't come at all for fear of sanctions from their State or their own religious affiliations.

Some are numb from re-activated traumas of past deaths or intifadas. Some are just paralyzed and want to go back to normal occupation where the wounds are hidden.

For those of you who don't know your way to the hill, follow me. Put on your sackcloth or your keffiyah. Spread it out on the ground. Use it to cover the bodies. Use it to ward off the vultures of ignorance and the carrion-eaters of ravenous anger and hate. Don't be afraid to become Rizpah or join other crazed Rizpahs. It is the least we can do. If life is sacred then death and mourning are sacred too.

Go and stand in solidarity at your local protests, write letters to the editor, stop buying settler or Israeli products, demand the international community intervene and not just issue statements of "grave concern." Don't bury your hope. The shadows of the crosses provide shade during the day and the night air on the hill is cool. Is this not the fast we are called to during this holy season of fasting and prayers? To loosen the yoke of oppression?

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