

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Hills
Knoxville, Tennessee
Dr. Jay Howell
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“Not Here: Desperate Times”
2 Samuel 21:1-14

Three weeks ago, when our youth led us in worship, they started us off in this series “Not Here,” which has been our focus in worship after Easter. It all stems from the angel’s proclamation at the empty tomb, the good news of the resurrection which we heard in the Gospel of Mark: “He has been raised; he is not here.” So we’ve been asking, what does it mean for God to be at work, for the new life of Christ to be at work, even when we can’t see it. And since that point, we’ve been looking at instances in the Old Testament in which God seems distant from his people but is at work in ways that aren’t immediately obvious. We’ll be in this series one more week after today, and then in two weeks we’ll begin a new series looking at the letter of 1 Peter. (Special thanks to Rachel Hamburger for all her work in putting that series together.)

Today, we come to a passage that is in many ways disturbing. It is an account of long-held grudges, political opportunism, and graphic violence. But in the midst of it, a quiet act of heartbreaking tenderness, and it makes all the difference. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours.
Amen.

I’ve fortunately never had to live under a military siege, but this time twelve years ago, I saw what seemed to bear at least a mild resemblance. In 2008 I was living in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and that year there was a global food shortage. All that on top of all the economic turmoil going on at the time.

Now Argentina is big food exporter, so Argentina didn’t experience a food shortage per se. But due to a standoff between the government and the country’s farmers, the farmers actually went on strike, stopped producing altogether. More than that, they actually set up blockades on all the roads going into the capital and prevented any trucks from getting into the city. So the city starved, and things like a bag of milk (milk comes in bags down there) or a loaf of bread became more valuable than jewelry—that’s an exaggeration, but not far off.

During that time, something as simple as going to the grocery store became a bit more survival-oriented. A trickle of food was still getting into the city, but everyone was in the same boat. Led to some desperation. The folks in the grocery aisles with you, they weren’t your fellow customers; they were your competition. Changed the way people interacted, and not usually for the better. It seemed the whole city was on edge.

Mercifully the blockade didn’t last terribly long. But I can only imagine what it would have been like for that kind of existence to have gone on not for weeks (as was the case then) but for years.

In this account in the book of 2 Samuel, the first verse of chapter twenty-one tells us that “there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year.” Three years. Imagine three years of a food shortage. Two days ago, I felt lucky that Kroger had the kind of bread we typically get, because in other weeks I had to get a different kind of bread, but I was still

annoyed that they were out of chicken breasts and half and half. Imagine three years of an ongoing food shortage. What would that do to a people? What would that do to a king?

I'm zeroing in on this three-year famine because it informs everything else about the story. Every action we read about, it is happening during a time of famine, when food is hard to come by, and people are becoming more and more desperate and even ruthless.

King David seems desperate. Seems desperate to me at least. Can't say I blame him. I mean if he is a king who is at all concerned about his people's well-being—and that's not a guarantee with kings, but David was a pretty good king most of the time—a three-year famine undermines the most basic foundations of his kingdom. If the people are hungry, who knows what they'll do?

At this time in David's reign, his hold on power is not as secure as he would like it to be, so a three-year famine, in which the people grow increasingly restless and desperate, is not what David was hoping for, and as his people get desperate, he gets desperate.

So, he inquires of the Lord as to the reason for this famine, and he learns that it is because of a "bloodguilt" on Saul, for what Saul had done to a people known as the Gibeonites, who were kind of a regional neighbor to Israel.

Here's what happened. A long time before this, before David, before Saul, when Israel was first coming into the Promised Land, they were scaring the pants off of all the folks who lived in the area, including this people the Gibeonites. (This is all in the Book of Joshua.) So the Gibeonites come to Israel's leader Joshua, and they act like they're from really far away, so Joshua figures, we have no fight with them, no harm in making a treaty with them. But then it's revealed that the Gibeonites are actually neighbors, which means Joshua had just made a covenant with a people whose land he was supposed to take. Tricky as it was, a covenant was a covenant, so the treaty stood.

But then centuries later, King Saul, the first king of Israel, had apparently resented the fact that the Gibeonites had this protection, so he attempts to wipe them out, the text says, "in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah." (This story isn't recorded in the Bible; it's just spoken of afterward.)

So, the Gibeonites have had a long-held grudge against Israel and in particular against Saul, even long after he was dead. So when David comes to them, desperate to bring an end to this famine, he asks them what he can do to make it right. They hem and haw a little bit, but eventually they decide to settle an old score and tell him in v. 5, "The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us [referring to Saul], so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel—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."

Now you might not realize it just from reading that, but what they're asking for is actually against the law. In Hebrew law, the child is not to be punished for a parent's crimes or vice versa. Forbidden.

But David says yes. And that's exactly what he does. He rounds up seven sons and grandsons of Saul, gives them to the Gibeonites, and true to their word, they impale them, and they all died.

Some think David was just doing what he thought was right. There was bloodguilt, so he interpreted that to mean that this was required. Others think David used this as an excuse to get rid of some possible political rivals, a bunch of descendants of the previous king. It's possible either of those was true.

But I think David was desperate. He was so desperate to resolve this famine that whatever the Gibeonites had asked, he would do. And what we end up with is this bloody scene of seven dead sons, a vengeful people in the Gibeonites, and a desperate king.

Desperation can make people do horrible things. It can make people justify doing horrible things. It's like we can lose our very humanity.

Incidentally twelve years ago when I was in Buenos Aires a movie came out called *The Dark Knight*. It's one of those Batman movies, and in this one, Batman is facing off against The Joker. Now this version of the Joker is all about tearing things down and bringing about chaos, and in one confrontation, he tells Batman what he thinks about people: "Their morals, their code, it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be. I'll show you. When the chips are down, these civilized people, they'll eat each other." And even though he's crazy and even though it's just a movie, there's a point there. Desperation can make people do horrible things. At the very least, it can make people look at the world with only cynicism or pessimism.

That might be how some of us look at things these days. So much is going wrong that at some point you just stop looking for anything to get better and just look to get by.

And in 2 Samuel 21, if we stopped reading in v. 9, that's about the picture we would get too. A desperate king, a vengeful people, and a gruesome execution. That's just how the world works in desperate times, and we shouldn't expect anything else.

But that's not the end of the story. V. 10 tells us how a woman named Rizpah took on sackcloth (the clothing for mourning) and went up to the mountain where the executions had taken place. You see, Rizpah was the mother of two of those sons who had been killed, and what she does is absolutely heartbreaking; I can't even fathom it. From the beginning of the harvest until the rain came—hard to say how long that was, but it doesn't imply that it was a short stretch of time—she stayed on the mountain where her sons had been executed, where their bodies had been left to rot, and for days, weeks, months, we don't know, she drives off the birds by day and the scavengers by night.

But at some point the king hears about it. And for David there was something about this mother's actions that spurs him to another action. He gathers the bones of Saul and of Saul's son Jonathan, and of all those who had been executed, and lays them to rest in their homeland. There was nothing earthshattering about that, but then the text offers one simple note at the end in v. 14: "After that, God heeded supplications for the land."

The point is, it wasn't David's desperation or what he did out of it that made everything right. It wasn't the indulgence of the Gibeonites' vengeance. It wasn't the graphic execution of seven men. It was instead the tender, heartbreaking act of a grieving mother in the midst of all this desperation and violence that set in motion God's work being seen again in the land.

The temptation when we face desperate times is to live into them, to believe that the only true statement in such times is something like "Desperate times call for desperate measures." Friends, if that's true, our hope truly is nothing more than a bad joke, and we might as well live into our basest impulses. Get yours. Take no prisoners. Survival of the fittest. But that's not the way things could be. That's not what we're called to be.

Friends, when we proclaim, "Christ is risen," we are saying that even in desperate times, even after the world threw out the very worst it had to offer, sending Jesus to the cross, the Lord is at work stirring new life into what we would call hopeless. And while the resurrection of our Lord was no doubt divine power of life over death, the signs that point to that life at work don't necessarily need to be miracles. When desperation breeds more desperation, when people are

more prone to turn on one another, to blame one another, to attack one another, it can be a simple act of decency and compassion that starts to show another power at work.

Just this past Thursday, Pastor Rachel led us in our online service for National Day of Prayer. And we spent time lifting up those within our church, within our city, within our country, those in the government, military, healthcare, a great time of the church gathering to pray. And inevitably, as you pray, there's a mix of thanksgiving and petition, giving thanks for some things and asking for God's help and provision in others. In a time of prayer like this, in a season that's as troubling as the one we are in, there's no shortage of things to ask for God's help about. So it could be easy to get overwhelmed.

But at one point, our own Allie Harmon offered a few words. He asked for prayer for his own health, sharing the struggle it has been being more or less in isolation because of precautions he has to take and precautions his living community has to take. He shared just how hard it had been to make sense of everything going on, and he asked for prayer for him. But then he also noted how grateful he was for his family caring for him, and not just his family but others within the church caring for him, reaching out to him, in particular Diana and Kent Koebke. And then he said something that really caught my ear, and I asked him if I could share it with you. He said, "I'm so glad I'm still here to see how wonderful people can be in a terrible situation." I'm so glad I'm still here to see how wonderful people can be in a terrible situation.

Friends, you've heard it said, "Desperate times call for desperate measures," and I suppose in some cases that's true. Sometimes actions are urgently that in other instances wouldn't be appropriate. But too often things are done in the name of desperate times to justify our being unkind to each other, our being indifferent to each other, our being harsh with each other, and that can turn into a cycle that reinforces and feeds back on itself.

But what does it say if in the midst of desperate times, we look for the acts of simple decency, of uncommon compassion? Doesn't mean that a miracle is expected of us, but as we saw in the story of Rizpah and King David, as we hear from Allie, and as we know from the empty tomb of Christ our Lord, we can never know what life could be set in motion by a small but powerful act of love.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**