

**8 Pentecost
July 15, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation;
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus;
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

People who have been around the Episcopal Church for a while will know that the usual response after one of the readings from Holy Scripture ... the response in the Book of Common Prayer is, "The Word on the Lord," and the congregation responds with "Thanks be to God." Here at St. Cyprian's we have substituted, "Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people." And the congregation responds with, "Amen. Amen." Today's reading from the Gospel of Mark is one of the reasons for the change ... the beheading of John the Baptist does not deserve a "Thanks be to God."

The beheading of John the Baptist was a horrific act. Today, we live in a world where there are horrific acts of cruelty in the news every day. So what are we to do with them? And what are we to do with the horrific acts that happen in our own lives ... life-threatening illnesses, the sudden death of a loved one, a bitter divorce ... you get the idea ... what are we to do with the horrific acts that happen in our own lives all the time?

So here is the story again ...

A faithless king disowned his own wife to marry his brother's wife. When a prophet condemned this dishonorable marriage, the king's new wife was furious, and the king, ignoring his conscience, imprisoned the truth-telling prophet. Soon afterwards, the king threw himself a birthday party, got drunk, and invited his step-daughter ... who is also his niece ... to dance for his guests. Her performance "pleased" him so much that he promised her anything she desired, even up to half of his kingdom. The girl ... spurred on by her mother ... demanded the imprisoned prophet's death. Unwilling to lose face in front of his guests, the king reluctantly kept his promise. Before the birthday party was over, the girl received the prophet's head on a platter.

That is the story we just heard. But let's put it into a larger context. Here is another way to tell the story ...

One day in the temple, an angel appeared to an elderly priest. The angel promised the priest a son, a special child who would become a powerful prophet and forerunner of the Messiah. When the stunned priest doubted the angel's message ... because his wife was old and barren ... the angel took away his ability to speak. Nine months later, however, the angel's promise came true ... down to the last letter ... the child was born, the overjoyed priest recovered his speech, and everyone who heard about the miracle birth was awestruck.

With the expectations of his family and community ringing in his ears as he was growing up, the prophet matured and took to the wilderness. Eager to fulfill his vocation, he chose an austere and arduous lifestyle. He called everyone he met ... even the king of the land ... to repentance, faithfulness, and justice. He “prepared the way of the Lord” ... he baptized the Messiah ... and eagerly announced the arrival of God’s kingdom.

But then? But then he landed in prison for speaking truth to power. Alone, he suffered doubt and despair about the Messiah he thought he recognized. Hoping beyond hope, he receive no solace or rescue from that Messiah. And, in the end, he got his head chopped off during a birthday party to appease a clueless girl, a cruel-hearted queen, and a cowardly king.

Remember, these are Bible stories. Maybe not the ones in the Children’s Storybook Bible ... but they are there. And, in spite of what appears to be an innocent story about David bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, the backstory about the verse that says that Michal looked out her window and “despised David in her heart” is just as bad ... so bad that I would not repeat some of it in church. [See addendum at end of sermon.] I don’t believe these stories deserve a “Thanks be to God.” I think “Amen. Amen.” is sufficient.

Back to John the Baptist. Maybe I haven’t looked hard enough, but I can’t find one shred of hope, redemption, or good news in the last chapter of John the Baptist’s life. His is a heartbreaking and wholly senseless death.

Of course, we Christians are trained to slap all kinds of redemptive meaning on tragedy: "Nothing happens in this world unless God wills it," is one of the stories I grew up with. "He never gives anyone more than they can bear," is another. "God has a plan," is still another, and so is, "For everything, there is a season. A time to be born and a time to die."

I know this all too well. Twenty-five years ago, when my son Christopher was in a coma following an auto accident, and I was sobbing after one of the ten minute visits we were allowed every two hours, a friend came up, hugged me and said, “It is going to be OK. God will take care of Christopher.” I held my tongue, but all I could think is that maybe it was going to be OK ...but it wasn’t OK right then ... it was horrific.

These Bible stories certainly have their merits, but some sorrows ... like those that plague John’s death ... just plain don’t fit into them. Most of the pious stories I’ve inherited through the Church are not pointed enough; they’re lukewarm, halfhearted, and polite. They move to closure, redemption, and triumph too quickly. So, where is the Christian story that can handle horror? Where is the Christian story that will sit in the darkness and trust that God is there, too ... instead of reaching too quickly and compulsively for brightness?

What bothers me about John the Baptist’s death ... in addition to its gruesomeness ... is its utter senselessness. John dies at the whim of a clueless teenager. He dies because a powerful

woman has a callous heart and a lustful man has a shallow sense of honor. He dies for moral cowardice. He dies for a dance.

In other words, John is one of those people ... we all know them ... who does everything right, and then suffers anyway. Worse, he dies disillusioned and afraid, unsure of his Messiah. Worse still, he suffers a death that accomplished nothing ... no one is saved, no one is converted, and no one finds justice or mercy as a result of his execution.

Maybe “the point” of this story is to indict all forms of Christianity that promise us comfort, prosperity, and blessing in exchange for our good behavior. Maybe the point is that God doesn't exist to shield us from pain, sorrow, or premature death ... however much it offends our sensibilities to admit this. Maybe the point is that we don't need to slap purpose or meaning on all human experience in order to prove our piety. Maybe some things are just plain horrible. Period.

It's tempting to read a story like John the Baptist's and tell ourselves that it's anachronistic ... that it comes from a rougher, cruder, and more barbaric time. But of course the opposite is true. We still, right now, today, live in a world where faithlessness is an accepted norm. We still live in world where the innocent are detained, imprisoned, tormented, and killed. We still live in a world of sudden and random violence. We still live in a world where young girls are made to be sexual objects for powerful men. And we still live in a world where speaking truth to power is a rare and revolutionary act ... and is often met with death of one kind or another.

And, the problem is not just “out there” in the world. It also happens close to home. In my own life, I still live in a world where I distance myself from people who tell me truths I'd rather not hear. I still live in a world where I worry more about sounding stupid, or losing face, than I do about practicing discretion, admitting my mistakes, and humbling myself in front of people I'm desperate to impress. I still live in a world where people around me live lonely lives and die meaningless deaths. And, since I feel impotent in the face of all this, much of the time I do nothing.

This story of John the Baptist is contained in the gospels of Mathew, Mark, and Luke. According to Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus heard of John's death, “he left in a boat to a remote area to be alone.” Notice he didn't preach. He didn't turn the horror into a morality tale. He didn't minimize his loss with any version of pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by. He withdrew into silence. He sought solitude. He lingered over his pain and created space for it to spend itself. And then? This is the story we will hear next week ... then he fed people. The Feeding of the Five Thousand directly follows John's death. Jesus came back from mourning, asked a crowd to sit down, gathered whatever bread and fish he could find, and fed people.

How much more credible and relevant we would be ... if we take seriously what Jesus took seriously ... if we'd follow Jesus's example as we confront the world's ongoing horrors. Some things are too terrible for words. Some hurts can't be salvaged with a neat story. So we must honor the silence. We must create space for grief. We must allow ourselves to mourn freely.

And when we are ready, we can feed the people around us with whatever we've got. Somehow, it will always be enough, even if we can't explain how or why. This is how we make the sorrows bearable.

The ultimate story of horrific cruelty and torture is the crucifixion of Jesus. Yes, we know the end of the story ... the Resurrection three days after his death. But all too often we ... and I mean the Church ... do not allow for a time to grieve ... a time for solace ... a time for silence. However, if we are ever to know the full power of the Resurrection, we must also live fully into the horrific pain of the death.

The horrific story of the beheading of John the Baptist is only surpassed by the crucifixion of Jesus. Yes, we know the end of the story ... the new life of the Resurrection. Last week I ended my sermon with a poem by Wendell Berry. The last line of the poem is "Practice Resurrection."

So, live into the pain of horrific loss. Grieve ... mourn ... find solace and solitude. Then feed those around you with the new knowledge your soul has earned. There will always be enough. Practice Resurrection!

Amen. Amen.

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ADDENDUM – this is the part of the sermon I cut out because of length and content.

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We heard two stories this morning ... one from the book of 2nd Samuel, the other from Mark's Gospel. I wonder if any of you took note of this verse in the story of David bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem:

"As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart." (2 Samuel 6:16)

So who is Michal? And what is the rest of the story? If Michal "despised him in her heart" what ever happened to her and what was her relationship to David?

Let me start at the beginning of the David saga. Eli was a priest at the temple at Shiloh. A woman named Hannah, who was barren, was near the entrance to the temple, her head down, and weeping. Eli saw her and thought she was drunk and chastised her. She explain that she was barren and wanted nothing more than to bear a child. Eli blessed her and she became pregnant. Does the story sound familiar? Like Sarah and Abraham ... maybe? Or, Elizabeth and Zachariah?

Anyhow, Hannah has the child, a son, and he names him Samuel. But then, Hannah takes Samuel back to Eli, gives Samuel to Eli to raise so that he would be dedicated to God. Samuel then becomes a spiritual leader in Israel, and he is the one to pick and anoint David as the new king to replace Saul.

Now David's relationship to King Saul was ... as they say ... "complicated." Saul saw David as a threat to his authority, yet David was also an asset to the people of Israel. It was in that context that Saul tried to put David into a no win situation ... he offered David his daughter Michal in marriage. David's response ... what Saul was trying to evoke to embarrass David ... was "I am a poor and lightly esteemed man" meaning that he did not have the money to put up the necessary dowry for Saul's daughter. Saul responded with a deal ... if David would bring him the foreskins of 100 Philistines he could have Michal as his wife. Now David had no interest in Michal ... he loved Jonathon ... but he did have an interest in winning this battle with Saul, so he brought him the foreskins of 200 Philistines!

So, that is the backstory of why Michal "despised him in her heart" when she looked from her window and saw David dancing his heart out in front of the Ark of the Covenant. (David's dancing in front of the Ark of the Covenant is mentioned four times in the short reading. Obviously he was making a spectacle of himself.)

The rest of the story is that Saul tries to kill David, and David went into hiding ... without Michal. Saul then gave Michal away to another man. In the meantime David marries at least a couple more women, but then went back to Saul and demanded Michal be returned to him. David once more wins the contest between him and Saul ... Michal was returned to David over the objections of her new husband, and that is the last we hear of her. Poor Michal was nothing more than a pawn in the chess game between Saul and David.