

**7 Pentecost
July 11, 2021**

**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.**

Before I begin I want to note a couple of caveats about this sermon. First, it contains stories of violence, and sexual content ... it could be rated R.

Secondly, if I were to say everything I would like to say about our lessons this morning we'd be here for hours. So, this is only the tip of the iceberg.

Finally, if you haven't noticed before, we at St. Cyprian's ... at times ... do things a little differently. There are a few in the congregation who grew up in the Episcopal Church ... but there are others who did not. For those who are familiar with the Episcopal Church liturgy, the response after one of the readings in our liturgy was always, "The Word of the Lord" ... and the people would respond, "Thanks be to God." But, for us at St. Cyprian's the response is, "Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people." And the people respond, "Amen. Amen."

Today's reading from Mark's gospel about the beheading of John the Baptist deserves an "Amen. Amen." ... not 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 ... the sudden death of a loved one, life-threatening illnesses, a bitter divorce, loss of employment and financial security ... sometimes even homelessness. You get the idea. So, what are we to do with the horrific acts that happen in our own lives all the time? How do we grieve? Where is God in all this?

So here is the story of John the Baptist's horrific death ... A faithless king ... King Herod ... disowned his own wife so he could marry his brother's wife. Then a prophet ... John the Baptist ... condemned this dishonorable marriage. The king's new wife was furious, and the king ... ignoring his conscience ... imprisoned the truth-telling prophet ... even when the king knew that John the Baptist was telling the truth.

John the Baptist spoke truth to power, and he was jailed for it.

Soon afterwards, the king ... King Herod ... threw himself a birthday party. He got drunk ... and invited his step-daughter, Herodias ... 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 John the Baptist's head on a platter. What a gruesome story ... but it is a Bible story. Another story we heard this morning is about David. In spite of what appears to be an innocent story about David bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, there is a backstory.

¹⁶As 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.

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?

Michal was King Saul's youngest daughter. Now David's relationship to King Saul was ... as they say ... "complicated." Saul saw David as a threat to his authority, yet David was a great warrior and 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 bride-price ... a kind of reverse 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 ... Michal had fallen in love with David, but David loved Jonathon. But David did have an interest in winning this battle with Saul, so instead of the foreskins of 100 Philistines, he brought him the foreskins of 200 Philistines! (1 Samuel 18:25-27)

Remember, this is a Bible story. It may be rated R for violence and sexual content ... but it is a Bible story.

So, that is who Michal is ... daughter of Saul, and David's first wife ... at least for a time. The rest of the story ... which can be found in the Second Book of Samuel ... is that Saul tried to kill David, and David went into hiding ... without Michal. Michal had been abandoned, so Saul then gave Michal away in marriage to another man. In the meantime David married at least a couple more women. However, as David's power grew and time passed ... David went back to Saul and demanded Michal be returned to him. Although Saul at first refused to comply with David's demand, David once more won the contest between him and Saul ... Michal was returned to David over the objections of her new husband. Poor Michal ... the daughter of a king ... was nothing more than a pawn in the chess game between Saul and David.

So this morning we heard that Michal looked out her window as David danced ... half naked ... around the Ark of the Covenant, and she "despised him in her heart." I wonder why. When David finally showed up at home, Michal accused him of exposing himself ... and his "private parts" ... to all the slave-girls as he danced. His response to her scolding was a taunt ... "I will dance before Yahweh and dishonor myself even more, but among the slave-girls that you speak of I will be honored." The narrator tells us that this argument between David and Michal ends

with, "And Michal, daughter of Saul, had no child unto the day of her death." Meaning, David did not sleep with Michal ... did not have sex with her again ... denying her the opportunity to have a child ... to have an identity of a child-bearer ... essentially declaring her existential dead.

These are our Bible stories today. Where do they lead us? Where do we find God in all this?

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."

These Bible stories certainly have their merits, but some sorrows ... like those that follow 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 Church's story that can handle horror? Where is the faith 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 our faith 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 ... full stop.

When my son was in a coma following an auto accident I came out of the ICU and just sobbed. A friend came to me and said, "Ted, don't cry. Everything is going to be alright." Maybe it was going to be alright ... maybe not. But at that moment it certainly wasn't alright. I didn't need to hear platitudes ... I needed a safe place for my grief ... my fears ... and my tears ... to be expressed.

It's tempting to read a story about the complicated relationship of David and Saul ... or of John the Baptist and King Herod ... and tell ourselves that it's anachronistic ... that it comes from a rougher, cruder, and more barbaric time. However, that is just not true. We ... today ... live in a world where innocent people around the globe are detained, imprisoned, tormented, and killed. We live in a world of sudden and random violence. We live in a world where young girls are made to be sexual objects for powerful men. And we 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 know 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, than I do about admitting my mistakes, and humbling myself in front of people I'm desperate to impress. I 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 Matthew, 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 what he didn't do ... 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. Instead, he withdrew into silence ... he sought solitude ... he leaned into his pain ... and created space for it to spend itself ... a space in which he could be held by God.

What did Jesus do next? 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 grieving ... 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. We need to find the safety within our selves to allow God to hold us.

Then ... when we are ready ... we can feed the people around us with whatever we've got. Sometimes we feed them with food ... sometimes with tears ... sometimes with our mere presence. Somehow, it will always be enough, even if we can't explain how or why. This is how we make the sorrows bearable.

There is much more to be said. More to be said about flawed and broken people like David who are anointed by God ... and how his story can be our story as well. There is more to be said about taking seriously what Jesus took seriously, especially in the moments of his humanity such as grief over the loss of a close friend. Yes ... there is more to be said ...

And, yes, these Bible stories sometimes contain sexual content ... and sometimes contain violence. Like it or not, the world around us also contains sexual content and violence ... sometimes, too much of it. I don't think our response to hearing these stories deserves a "Thanks be to God" ... I believe that "Amen. Amen" is sufficient.

Amen. Amen.