

“Suffering, or Sacrifice” Pentecost 7 (B) – July 11, 2021

by Tim Hall

RCL: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

What a gruesome story we have in our Gospel reading this morning. And how odd that it is juxtaposed with the joyous story of David dancing before the LORD as the Ark of the Covenant is carried up, in a festive procession, with “lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals”, from the wilderness to Jerusalem. And then we have the apostle Paul’s spirit-inspired opening in his letter to the Ephesians that extols the unearned grace and blessing of God, bestowed upon us through the example and sacrifice of Christ our LORD. And then we are presented with this story of the beheading of John the Baptist, which is so gruesome, in fact, that my initial reaction was to ignore it completely and preach, instead, on one of our other readings.

Where is the connection? David danced before the LORD and Herodias danced before her father. David is derided by Michal, the daughter of Saul, whom he had taken as a wife after the death of Saul. Herodias is directed by her mother to request the execution of John, because he has been questioning the legality of King Herod’s relationship with her. Both stories have a dark side that follows jubilation. Isn’t that life? Joy and sorrow.

But a louder message was coming to me from the Gospel passage... “what would I be willing to die for?” What would you die for? We are all going to die someday. That’s a fact. Even more certain than taxes! We’re surrounded by death. We’ve seen our friends and relatives continually listed in our bulletins – three just last week. In the collapse of the Surfside condo building, in the COVID pandemic, of course, and in the continued gun violence. Just this last weekend, as we were celebrating the 4th of July with our Ice Cream Social, more than 140 people across our nation lost their lives to handgun shootings with more than 600 wounded! But even in the face of so much suffering, we can be rather flippant about death with expressions like, “I was so embarrassed I could have died” or “I’m just dying to see that new movie.” You get the idea.

But, seriously, what would we truly be willing to sacrifice ourselves for? Is there anything that could make us put our lives on the line *before* our appointed time?

David had put his life on the line when he heard the LORD call and came from tending the sheep to defeat the mighty Goliath. Of course, the Apostle Paul put his life on the line to spread the Good News of salvation for all, through the

sacrifice of Christ and eventually was martyred for his faith. And John put his life on the line to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of heaven.

It's interesting where this recounting of John's beheading is told in Mark's Gospel. Mark has an amazing literary style. Recall a few weeks ago we read the passage in chapter 3 where Jesus is confronted by the crowd, then his family, and then the scribes before arriving at the central theme of casting out demons ("How can Satan cast out Satan?") After which, in reverse order, scribes, family, and crowd are addressed. The structure is called a *chiastic* literary style. And then, two weeks ago on healing Sunday, Rev. Deb preached on the passage that we read about Jairus's daughter and the hemorrhaging woman. Again, a story within a story. It's like Mark has so much to say that he jumps from one story to the next before finishing his initial thought, and then has to circle back around to wrap things up.

And then we come to today's passage. The literary term for what we read this morning is *analepsis*, a technique that involves interruption of the chronological sequence of events by interjection of events or scenes of earlier occurrence. We know it better as a *flashback*.

Recall, our guest celebrant, the Rev. Melanie Lewis, preached on the passage that immediately precedes this morning's reading. Jesus had given the disciples authority over unclean spirits and sent them out, two-by-two, telling them to rely on the hospitality of strangers and to "shake off the dust on your feet" and move on, if ever they were not welcomed. And they went and "cast out many demons" and cured the sick.

The last time we've heard anything about John, before this morning's passage, was way back in chapter 1. Right after Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River and driven out to the wilderness for his encounter with Satan, John is arrested. And now, six chapters later, we hear what happened to him. Jesus, meanwhile, has been working his ministry up north, in the Galilean region, out of the Jerusalem spotlight. But he has done so much now that crowds are gathering, following him from village to village, and the word of his amazing healing and teaching is spreading.

Herod has probably never heard of him until now. It was John who was the thorn in his side and Herod had taken care of him. But now, with word of Jesus's miracles and his disciples exploits reaching his ears, he worries that "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised," and so the story is recounted.

And then, immediately following the flashback (and looking ahead to next Sunday's reading, perhaps) we return to the disciples, who have returned from their missions and enthusiastically report back to Jesus on what they have accomplished. And then we all move on to the feeding of the 5,000!

I want to jump back in time about 25 years myself. My own flashback, if you will. Jesus and John are just boys, cousins who live close enough to spend time together. Have their parents told them the miraculous stories concerning their births? Zechariah and Elizabeth were just amazed that they had become parents in their old age and probably try to protect him as much as possible. But do the boys know they are destined for far different things than running through olive groves, climbing trees, and playing in the wadi? I like to think not, that they enjoyed childhoods just like any other kids until, as young men, they realized their callings and knew that their lives would be sacrificed for things far greater than they could imagine as children.

So thinking on their example, and that of the disciples, and on the many prophets, priests, and martyrs throughout the ages, what would we die for. To what will we devote our lives? Would you push someone you love out of the way of an oncoming bus to save them? I like to think I would. How about giving up a kidney even if the surgery is dangerous and it brings us one step closer to death. To profess our faith and not back away from it in the face of certain death, like Joan of Arc or Dietrich Boenhoffer or many others throughout the ages?

Rev. Melanie said, "invite someone to church". I think we can at least do that! We did that last week with our ice cream social. And we can do far more if we spend our lives dancing before the LORD, remembering that we are a people of faith who follow Jesus. Our deepest hopes and dreams are rooted, in what St. Paul describes in our epistle today as the "glorious grace that [God] freely bestowed on us." Scripture reminds us that no matter what twists and turns we face in life, no matter what trials or disappointments we suffer, they do not compare to the "inheritance" that God has for us. Paul writes, "having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will," we are "blessed... with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places," and, as we sang in our gradual hymn, "marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit... the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people."

That's where we can put our faith, even in the face of certain death. Jesus Christ has gone there for us already, and prepared a place for us. Thanks be to God!
Amen.