

## July 15, 2018 – Beheading of John the Baptist

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

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“You can kill the messenger, but not the message.” Have you ever heard that expression? I think that is what our Gospel is about this morning. The gory beheading of John the Baptist silenced John the Baptist, but the message lived on.

The Holocaust Memorial Council in the US, has an exhibition of items preserved during Hitler's time because he wanted to study what he termed “the Jewish question”. The more than 350 pieces in the exhibit reveal that even as captives in concentration camps, “Jews turned to religious art as a means of spiritual resistance. They created out of scraps of wood and fabric, humble ceremonial objects with which to worship.” They used whatever they could find to create Sabbath utensils and prayer garments so that even in the midst of their agony, they could worship. Observing Sabbath connected them with a truth beyond their own tragic circumstances; a truth which was still true, no matter what...”The Lord God was still the Lord God of Israel”...and they could still worship the eternal God. They were in this way able to face even their own annihilation. The message remained.

Today's Gospel had me stumped at first.

Dr. George Sumner, the president of Wycliffe College when I was a student used to say “You need to ask of the passage ‘What's the rub?’ . What in the passage makes you wonder. What doesn't sit right?...and that is what your sermon should address.

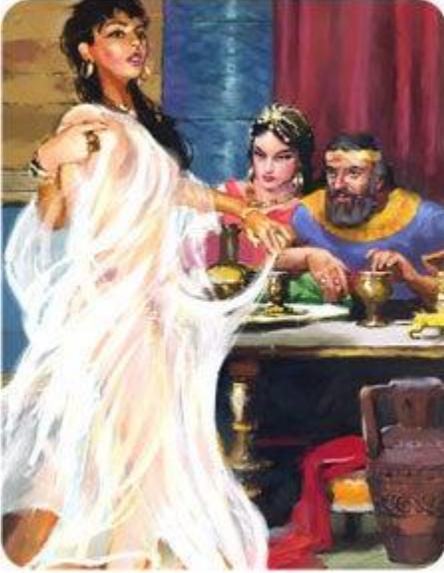
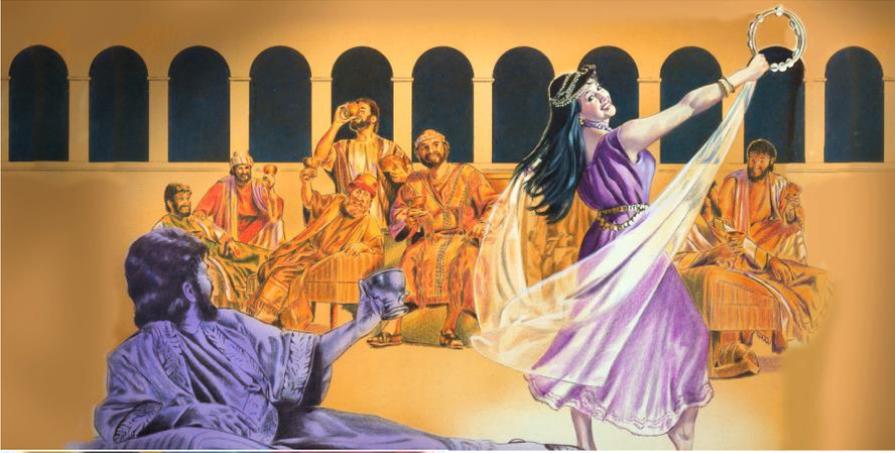
There's a lot in today's Gospel that makes you wonder. First of all, we might all wonder why such a gruesome story had to be included at all? It certainly isn't ‘Good News’ to know that John the Baptist was beheaded so impulsively. How did John feel at the moment when the soldier appeared with his sword flashing? It is too horrible to think that minutes later, John's severed head was served on a platter to Herodius at Herod's birthday banquet.

The characters in the drama leading up to John's death are disillusioning rather than inspiring. There is Herodius, Herod's wife, bearing a grudge against John because he called her marriage unlawful. Her hatred is intense. She wants John gone. Here is an artist's image of Herodius.



We have Herodius' daughter who is somewhat of a mystery. In the account of Josephus, she is named Salome. Why did she dance so provocatively? Did she just love dancing?...or was she trying to manipulate Herod? Why did she not have a wish of her own for Herod to grant? Why did she have to ask her mother? And then, why did she ask that John's head be brought to them on a **platter**? This is not a young girl with good motives.





And finally, we have King Herod who is not a king at all.



He is a tetrarch, a governor for the occupying Romans. He does not actually have a kingdom to offer Herodius' daughter. But Herod saw John to be a righteous and a holy man and so he *protected* him. Herod liked to listen to John. When he listened to John speak, it stirred something deep within him...and he recognized John was a great prophet. But in the end, Herod was John's destroyer, rather than his Saviour. He could not go back on his promise to the young dancer...that, in his culture would have been dishonourable...he would have lost face...even though he would have saved the life of a great prophet. So, Herod carried out the questionable whim of the young girl and the gory beheading occurs.

But the clue in this mystery is at the beginning of the Gospel. It is Herod's remark *'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'* Herod is reacting to the news that Jesus' disciples are healing and casting out demons. In response to this unsettling news, Herod says **'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'** **Then** the story of the beheading is told as a flashback.

What is important is that Herod sees a connection between John and Jesus. Herod did not literally think John was alive in Jesus. What he did realize was that he had killed the messenger, but not the message...and that is the key. The message; God's revelation of himself to his people, was still happening, through Jesus, despite the black deed of John's death...and **THAT is** good news. God's revelation could not be stopped despite a sinful slaying. God was still there...showing himself in Jesus, as a God who **loves** us and who is **with us**, who wants us to know him. And Jesus was now sending others to be messengers, to call people out of their misery to God.

John's death is a warning...a warning that the next great messenger, Jesus, will be silenced as well. But the same truth will apply...you can kill the messenger, but you can not kill the message. God is still God. As it says in this morning's reading from Ephesians: "He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will,"... 2000 years later, the message remains.

But this is still a rather sombre story. It reminds us that darkness exists and that it is powerful. Sometimes the darkness seems as if it will win. As the Gospel of John says...Jesus, is a light that shines in the darkness. The darkness does not overcome the light of Christ, but the darkness surrounds the light. It is ever present.

Today **we** are the messengers, sent out by our Lord, just as those first disciples were sent out. Jesus sent them out to call people from their futile ways to turn to God. As his messengers, we are strengthened with powers beyond our comprehension, just as the disciples of old. We are called to respond to the darkness in the world....'Jesus bids us shine with a pure clear light, like a little candle burning in the night,...

God loves us to communicate this love to others.

Our response to that great love is to shine in the dark, to be in that way like our Lord Christ... We cannot remove the darkness. As well as around us, there is darkness **in** each of us. We have the potential to be unkind, even cruel. There is sickness and there is the emotional pain of unhealthy relationships, failed relationships and loss of loved ones. There is poverty, there are addictions, there is racism. These are just facts of existence. But who we are in the midst of this is what matters. Whatever pain and darkness there is, God is still there. We are called to be lovers of God and to love one another. Sometimes it is in the darkest times that our own light shines the brightest.

When Jewish psychiatrist Victor Frankl was arrested by the Nazis in World War II, he was stripped of everything--property, family, possessions. He had spent years researching and writing a book on the importance of finding meaning in life. When he arrived in Auschwitz, the infamous death camp, even his manuscript, which he had hidden in the lining of his coat, was taken away.

He writes:

"I had to...overcome the loss of my spiritual child, "

Having lost what was so important to him, he wondered whether his life had any meaning left at all.

He was still wrestling with that question a few days later, when the Nazis forced the prisoners to give up their clothes.

"I ... inherited the worn-out rags of an inmate who had been sent to the gas chamber," said Frankl. "Instead of the many pages of my manuscript, I found in the pocket of the newly acquired coat a single page torn out of a Hebrew prayer book. It contained the main Jewish

prayer, Shema Yisrael (Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one God. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.)

Frankl writes "How should I have interpreted such a 'coincidence' other than as a challenge to **live** my thoughts instead of merely putting them on paper?"

Later, Frankl wrote in his book 'Man's search for Meaning',  
"There is nothing in the world that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions, as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one's life . . .'  
He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."

We have our 'why', it is similar to Frankl's ...ours is 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

We are bearers of this message. We may encounter oppositions but we can be confident that even if you kill the messenger, God still remains; eternal, loving and saving.

And so we respond to Jesus' call...Jesus bids us shine  
And we shine... in this world of darkness. Amen.

Colossians "...all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

<sup>6</sup>to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. <sup>7</sup>In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace <sup>8</sup>that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup>he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, <sup>10</sup>as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

## Two dances

Dearly Beloved, Grace and Peace to you.

In this Sunday's Old Testament reading David dances before the ark "with all his might," apparently pretty scantily clad. He's "girded by a linen ephod." Whatever an ephod is, it isn't up to dress code. Michal, the former king's daughter, reams him out for it.

Meanwhile in the Gospel lesson, Herod's daughter dances at his birthday party. She is applauded, and rewarded with anything she asks—and agrees to ask for the murder of John the Baptist.

Two dances: one soaked in depravity yet praised; the other an honest act of prayer, yet scorned. One is entangled in secret desires and schemes, in bitterness and revenge; the other is free and simple. One dancer reveals too much joy, too much of himself; the other reveals too much fear, too much of the palace's corruption. One dance is caught up in calculations for getting what one wants; the other is a pure gift. One is designed to please others; the other is offered without regard to what others think. One is a coin passed through many hands; the other a a song sung once.

And here's the rub: the one that becomes murderous is the one that fits in, that follows the rules, that functions as an acceptable tool of those in power. It's the dance of the system. The one that is pure worship, the dance of the heart, becomes a scandal.

Pure love never fits in. It exposes us, makes us look foolish. It comes from a place where who we are, our naked self, is lovely, and offered without reservation. It breaks rules, and it often evokes resistance. Fitting in to get what we want is usually rewarded, often by something no less awful than exactly what we wanted. And then by being used by someone else for what they want.

You're going to dance. The question is not whether, or even how. It's why.

May God give you both good reason and courage to dance.

Deep Blessings,

Pastor Steve

Hope you ordered something Italian! So Chris I mentioned yesterday... agrees - the Bible character he is like is St John the Divine...he is our parish visionary. He burns with zeal. He feels now we have become comfortable being on our own as St James, it is time for the corporation to think about the future. He knows we need to start small (my suggestion) but we also need to waste no time...we are aging. He thinks the future will involve repurposing our building. Wow! Chris is a preacher's kid – grew up in Ontario...I think yes to his vision! How do we harness this? I asked him to communicate this to Vestry either in person or in writing and that I would support him..

