

LOVE IS AS LOVE DOES

THE KILLING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

God of the prophets, whose word cuts through the webs of power and holds the tyrant to account: be with all who raise their voice against oppression and misrule, who are imprisoned and abused for freedom's sake; help us to stand with them, and to speak with and for them, in witness to your kingdom now; through Jesus Christ the name above all other.

from *Prayers for an Inclusive Church*, Steven Shakespeare

JULY 11, 2021

THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Amos 7:7-15, Psalm 85, Mark 6:14-29

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

THE REV. RANDALL C.K. DAY, D.MIN., PRIEST AND RECTOR

MAY I SPEAK AND MAY WE HEAR FROM THE HEART OF THE LIVING GOD
WHO IS CREATING, REDEEMING, AND SANCTIFYING US.

What difference did the killing of John the Baptist make to anyone?

Simply put, it was an atrocity committed on a whim at the end of a drunken party.

We remember John the Baptist, right? Not only the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, but before that, the cousin leaping in his mother's womb at the Visitation, when Elizabeth and Mary the mother of Jesus met before the births of John and Jesus – these sacred women embodying divine mission. We remember the mystery of those pregnancies, the expectation, the hope for the life of the whole world, the disruption,

the holy uncertainty, the wonder.

Then, a herald's voice in the desert: "clothed in camel's hair wearing a leather belt around his waist, and he ate nothing but grasshoppers and wild honey." "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to John and were baptized by him in the Jordan River."

His vision, his voice, his calling were so large they couldn't be contained in a city, in a religious structure, in a building.

The people – all the people wanted life to be different, as he said it could be, *would* be when the one to come after him would baptize everyone in the Holy Spirit.

We remember John the Baptist.

And we hear today of his killing.

No longer in the wilderness as big as all outdoors, he is confined in a cell, entertaining the rambling musings of a feckless leader who, on one hand, knew John to be holy and good, and, on the other hand, had a failure of nerve when it came to protecting him or freeing him.

John had criticized Herod for marrying his brother's wife and Herodias conspired to kill him because of the rebuke.

And it is worth taking note here, that John had no power, no position, no wealth, no influence that could have actually impacted Herod or Herodias – they were safe as safe could be – with a vendetta against a man on the margins.

What difference did the killing of John the Baptist make to anyone?

It was a pointless death, underscoring, yet again, that privilege wins – even when it doesn't have to – just because it wants to.

As we look at this tawdry story, it says that 2000 years may have passed, but humanity continues to squander itself.

It says that if we want something else, if we want to live in another way we need to make those choices for ourselves... and for

those choices to have even the smallest chance of working out for us – for the world – we will most likely need to have a community of people around us who will join together in the quest and who want to live and work in mutual support for the world John announced, that Jesus revealed....

Yes today's gospel reading sounds primitive and brutal – like so much of the news that has unfolded around us for too long, with such intensity.

The dancing of Salome delighted Herod, so he said "I will give you anything you ask, even half of my entire realm!" (Was there anyone around who could have used that wealth better? Needed it more than Salome?)

Prompted by her mother, Salome asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

And Herod complied.

But couldn't he have also said, I do not own people, ask for something I *do* own. We see not only a failure of nerve but a failure of character.

But, even if he knew better, which he probably didn't, Herod wanted to save face, pridefully burnish his false self, his public, superficial image, ready to represent.

No matter that an expression of the life of God, a human being would be destroyed by Herod's cowardice, Herod was unable to

stand up, to differentiate himself, to be whole and conscious and connected to the rest of the human endeavor.

And offended Herodias – threatened not at all, in reality – what she wanted was what she got.

Herodias had no actual sense of John, of where he came from, how he lived, what he did, who he served, how God had lived through him and was living through him.

So this magnificent expression of God was killed in this palace of the privileged, by wannabe royalty on the outskirts of the Roman empire – and, it was Rome that held all the real money and real power.

And what has changed in 2000 years?

Who is listening?

Who is invisible?

Who are *you* hearing?

Who are *you* seeing?

What will *you* change?

How will we as a community of trust, of love, of faith, of hope pay attention, see, listen, change in the weeks and months ahead?

In the life and work of Jesus, we are still called to the vast vision and dream of God, even after John's death, Jesus's crucifixion, and countless other losses known and unknown. God's dream was first expressed in creation and affirmed from age to age in the love that was and is the byword of all that is and our identities as friends

of Jesus, as ones who live in and express the universal life of Christ.

And love cannot be notional, an idea, a theory, an intention.

I close with some thoughts from bell hooks' book *All About Love: New Visions (A Love Song to the Nation)*:

bell hooks writes: "To begin by always **thinking of love as an action** rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility. **We are often taught we have no control over our "feelings."** Yet most of us accept that we **choose our actions**, that **intention and will** inform what we do.

We also accept that our **actions have consequences**. To think of actions shaping feelings is one way we **rid ourselves of conventionally accepted assumptions ...**

If we were constantly remembering that **love is as love does**, we would not use the word in a manner that devalues and degrades its meaning. **When we are loving we openly and honestly express care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment, and trust.** (pp. 44-45)

Encountering the killing of John the Baptist and so much other senseless, meaningless killing in our culture, we, as people of love,

and especially in this grieving world trying to shake itself awake after a global catastrophe, need to think of love as an action. And know as we have never known *and done* before that love is as love does.

To ask the question, the one from my teacher Jim Finley that I have put before you multiple times recently, it must be held in such a way that the word love is neither devalued nor degraded. And Jim's question, that leads to action, remains: "All things considered, what is the most loving thing [I or we] can do right now?"

Love is as love does.

We can **do** much better than Herod.

We **must** do much better than Herod... and all the other Herods between then and now.



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EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

2901 Nojoqui Avenue at Alamo Pintado Avenue, P.O. Box 39
Los Olivos, California 93441

www.smitv.org

The Rev. Randall C.K. Day, D. Min., *Priest and Rector*

The Rev. Courtney A.U. Tan, *Priest*

Ms. Jeannie Sears May, *Senior Warden*

Mrs. Karen R. Johnson, *Junior Warden*