

A Sermon for Sunday July 11, 2021

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer:

I love to read. I love to hear the voices of good story tellers who invite you into their stories. Lately, in many of the novels I've been reading, I find the authors using two interesting ways to tell their stories. Rather than beginning at the start of the story and masterfully taking you to the end, introducing their storyline and characters chronologically, these story tellers use flashbacks and different characters' voices to tell the story. The gospel writer Mark uses his own style to tell his story. Often using stories within stories to move you through. These stories sandwiched with each other can look like a flashback as we find in today's gospel about the death of John the Baptist. They can also, foreshadow what will come next.

Before stepping into today's gospel, I would like to say this, it is not a story I enjoy hearing, reading or frankly trying to find a way to preach about. Having said that I did find myself curious about what Mark was trying to do with the story. It seems on one level as though it comes completely out of left field. Mark has been telling his readers of Jesus' growing ministry in Galilee. Last week, we heard that Jesus sent his disciples out on their first mission. Today, we have the story about the grizzly death of John the Baptist, his head handed over on a platter. Immediately after John's story we switch back to where we were before, we hear about the disciples return to report to Jesus about how things went on their mission. So why this story at this point?

It is helpful to remember for Mark, John the Baptist's story and Jesus' story are intertwined with one another. Mark's gospel begins with the announcement of a messenger, John, who has come to prepare the way. He comes out of the wilderness dressed in camel's hair. Jesus begins in Nazareth of Galilee. John and Jesus meet at Jesus' baptism. Then Jesus goes into the wilderness himself. When he comes out, we hear that John is arrested, and Jesus begins his active ministry in Galilee. This all happens at the very beginning of Mark's first chapter. There is no further mention of John again until today's interjection into the narrative.

They met each other in person only once, wading in the water. One is bent over in the water, reaching out to one person at a time, pouring water over their

heads, cleansing them, having heard their cries of repentance. His voice is raw at times for all his preaching, as he calls people back to God. “Repent” he cries, “Repent.” “Return to God.” Did he finally look up and see the other coming towards him in the water, passing all the others waiting? Did he recognize then that this was the one he waited for all of his life? One is well known, at the zenith of his mission. One is taking his first steps into the life to which he was born. Did they know each other? Had they seen each other before? We do not know.

We hear from another storyteller, Luke, that their mothers were cousins. Did the one in the water with Jesus, feel his heart leap with joy and recognition as it had in his mother’s womb so long ago? Mark tells us they first met that day as one baptized the other. John and Jesus, cousins, their stories together change the world as they knew it, as we know it.

They both hear the words “You are my Son, the Beloved.” As they separate in the water, John continues his work alone. Jesus leaves to enter the wilderness alone. They do not see each other again as far as we know. John is soon arrested by the authorities, Herod Antipas, for speaking the truth. Jesus walks out of the wilderness changed. He hears of John’s arrest, and begins his ministry.

Mark understands the importance of their connection. John has a following. Crowds hear of him and gather around him to hear him preach and to baptize them with water. Those who followed him take his body after he had died and place it in a tomb. Joseph of Arimathea, one of Jesus’ followers, takes Jesus’ body after his death on the cross and puts him in his own tomb. John’s story leads us to Jesus, the one he has come to proclaim, John’s death foreshadows Jesus’ death to come. Both of them live their lives in opposition to the authorities in power. Both die horrible deaths. When one thwarts authority there will be consequences.

Next week, as we find ourselves back into the story, with Jesus and his disciples, it is as though the story of John’s death were nothing. Jesus’ disciples come to report what had happened to them on their mission, they and Jesus are off again with crowds following them. When Jesus eventually hears of John’s death, he goes off to pray before taking up his mission again. Soon after this, he will leave Galilee behind him and turn his face to Jerusalem and his fate there.

We all know the story, the whole story. Mark's telling leaves little to the imagination. However, there is more to the story for me. Both John's story and his fate, as well as, Jesus' story talk about the cost of living into a call to bring God's story to others. What does it cost us to live and love as Jesus did? To stand up for the truth as John did. John's truth telling, about Herod and Herod's life, is what got him arrested. Sometimes we are called to stand up for "truth." Sometimes we have to speak out about injustice. Sometimes we have to risk loving the unlovable. We are called to be there for those at the edges, living on the borders, those who look, sound, think and yes believe differently than we do. When we do, when we reach out, we might discover we have more in common than it would seem.

There are always stories which live side by side, stories which seem unconnected until we hear and see them all the way through. And in the end we might find a new beginning waiting for us. John led people to Jesus, his death foreshadowing Jesus death which takes us to new life.

To celebrate their special birthdays Archbishop Tutu and the Dali Lama met for a week at the Dali Lama's home in Dharmasala in India. Bishop Tutu is a well known and loved Anglican Bishop, The Dali Lama is the spiritual the head of Buddhism living in exile. Their conversation together along with their cowriter Douglas Abrams was to be a gift of hope to the world. They said together, after they met, "No dark fate determines the future. We do. Each day and each moment, we are able to create and re-create our lives and the very quality of life on our planet." Their friendship and their collaboration on "The Book of Joy" came to mind when thinking about John and Jesus and their connections and their stories.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu tells us, "We are fragile creatures, and it is from this weakness, not despite it, that we discover the possibility of true joy." He goes on, "Life is filled with challenges and adversity. Fear is inevitable, as is pain and eventually death. . . . Discovering more joy does not, I'm sorry to say save us from the inevitability of hardship and heart break. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive. As we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken." The Dali Lama said before his meeting with Bishop Tutu. "What is the purpose of life? After much consideration, I believe that the purpose of life is to find

happiness. The ultimate source of happiness is within us. Not money, not power, not status. We create most of our suffering, so it should be logical that we also have the ability to create more joy.”

Later in the book while talking about generosity Archbishop Tutu says, “Our book says that it is in giving that we receive. So, I would hope that people would recognize in themselves that it is when we are closed in on ourselves that we tend to be miserable. It is when we grow in self forgetfulness – in a remarkable way I mean we discover that we are filled with joy.” “The Archbishop and the Dali Lama were describing a special kind of generosity: the generosity of the spirit.” Douglas Abrams writes about them saying “They are big-hearted, magnanimous, tolerant, board minded, patient, forgiving, and kind.” It is a special way of being in the world that both of them seem to have. Archbishop Tutu goes on to describe this way of being - it is about becoming “an oasis of peace, a pool of serenity that ripples out to all those around us.”

The Dali Lama and Archbishop Bishop Tutu are trying to tell us, I believe that we all can make a difference. Our stories and connections like theirs like Jesus and John can make difference. They all tell us something about God’s story for all of us. Yes, there is suffering and horrific stories of death like John’s, yet there is more to life, this life, than that. What will we see and chose to dwell on and what will we do? May we together become an oasis of peace, a place of serenity that ripples out into the world.