

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 15, 2018
The Rev. Denise Trogdon

The Dangerous Road of Faith

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

I just recently returned from an adventure in Colorado and Arizona, where a group of friends embraced the desert life and walked the ancient paths. We hiked the narrow trail of Mesa Verde to explore ruins of the Hopi Indians built into the mountain. At 8500 feet, temperatures were high, the air was thin and the ledges thinner. One of our trail mates had already turned back because the heights were too daunting. With spectacular views and the fascinating history of these mountain cave dwellers, our dicey climb was well worth the effort. We returned to our car ready to rest, not knowing that the real danger was ahead.

Behind the wheel as we made our way around the curves of the mountain, I felt a hesitation and just over the crest of a hill, the wheel became rigid and the brakes failed. My silent prayers were answered as a small overlook appeared off to the right. We made our way to safety, even as we prepared to bail out of the car. When park rangers drove us to the bottom of the mountain, we realized what our fate could have been.

I can count on one hand times I have faced physical danger. I must admit that it clarifies one's priorities! We live in such freedom that rarely our choices are life altering. We can avoid situations we presume dangerous, and even ones that make us uncomfortable. This is a luxury not shared by all. Many face physical danger due to poverty, social status, race or religion. Practicing Christianity in some places of the world, means risking personal safety.

In our gospel we hear of one such story. This narrative has all the features of a binge-worthy miniseries: a drunken party, a provocative dance, a pride filled promise, a bitter grudge, an outrageous request, a conflicted response and silent witnesses. Mark's version of the beheading of John the Baptist is uncharacteristically detailed, and is the only story Mark tells in which Jesus makes no appearance. This tale describes the way of the world. Written just after the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem temple, it is a reminder that the Christian message can be subversive and unwelcome, especially when prophetic faith clashes with political power. John's beheading was the end of innocence for the disciples, foreshadowing Jesus' death and the dangerous road ahead for Jesus' followers.

But in our time, perhaps we have lost sight of the danger. This passage reminds us not only of the ways the world goes astray, but of the insidious nature of our complacency. If this was your story, which character would you be? You might be drawn to John the Baptist's passionate belief. His courage to speak truth to power and to live and die into his calling, places him among heroes like Martin Luther King or Oscar Romero. The cost is great to challenge systems that abuse power, but our desire for the status quo can leave us with a lukewarm faith. The Holy Spirit asks us to examine the temperature of our convictions.

Are you disturbed by Herod's dilemma? He is a conflicted character who is drawn to John's teachings, and yet driven by power and ambition. We can relate to Herod's weaknesses. Our daily life is filled with Herod-like struggles, negotiating between what is right and our need to keep the peace. Herod's choice of the king's image over a life, is repeated when power wins over mercy. The Holy Spirit asks us to recognize our failure of compassion.

Most of us can relate to the guests at Herod's party. We may not be decision makers or truth tellers, rather silent witnesses that go home from the party unmoved. How many of us turn our heads away from suffering? How many of us simply turn off the news? The Holy Spirit asks us to acknowledge our indifference.

At a church vitality conference given by the Diocese of Virginia, Bishop Shannon addressed the subject of faith in the public square. He spoke passionately of our need to pay attention to what is happening in the world, and to discern our call as a Christian people to be agents of change. He spoke of spiritual apathy that avoids conflict or silently witnesses human suffering. He made a clear distinction between partisan politics and standing up for the gospel in our time.

Bishop Shannon's litmus test for when to get involved is the Baptismal covenant. In baptism we make promises, or they are made on our behalf, to fashion our lives according to God's purpose. Here are the questions we are asked. Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship and in the breaking of the bread? We respond: I will with God's help. Will you persevere in resisting evil, and wherever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord? I will with God's help. Will you proclaim by word and example the Good news of God in Christ? I will with God's help. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? I will with God's help. Will you strive for justice among all people and respect the dignity of every human being? I will with God's help.

At the risk of my own beheading, I challenge you to examine where you are in the gospel passage this morning and in upholding your baptismal covenant. How is the Holy Spirit convicting you? Are you living a lukewarm faith? Do you need the passion of John to step up and turn your belief into action and even sacrifice? Do you make Herod-like decisions that lack mercy and compassion? Are you witnesses to oppression and complicit in your silence?

This is not the end of the story. We hear in Mark of Jesus' journey to the cross and to the victory of resurrection. Mark wants to tell the truth of the human predicament that we watch and despair over. Then he tells us another truth of God's loving and tenacious efforts to redeem us by the love of Christ that lives within us. So when the temples of our lives are destroyed, we've lost a job, lost a loved one, lost our health, we know that it is not the last word. With God's help we manifest that second truth through our love for one another and our willingness to live into our covenant.

We are all on a dangerous road my friends, and can lose our brakes and steering at any time. Thanks be to God we have one another to keep us on the path, angels to guide us to safe places, and sometimes painful reminders of what is important. I leave you with this familiar Franciscan blessing: May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers and half truths, so that we may live deep within our hearts. May God bless us with anger at

injustice and oppression so that we may work for justice, freedom and peace. May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer, so we may reach out our hands to comfort them. May God bless us with enough foolishness to believe we can make a difference in the world. Amen.