



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

**“Stubborn Hope”**

**Scripture – Mark 6:14-29**

**Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, July 15, 2018**

“If it bleeds, it leads.” Stories of brutal deaths, natural catastrophes, and human tragedies typically garner higher media ratings. Lurid tales and violent crimes often push substantive news to the sidelines. No doubt, if there had been television or newspapers in the first century, today’s passage would have been a lead story. Outside of the crucifixion of Jesus, today’s reading is the most gruesome in the gospels.

Our passage has the ring of a Shakespearean tragedy. It has been the subject of numerous artists, has been made into an opera, and produced as a play. The lead character is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. He is the ruler of Galilee during the ministry of Jesus and he is conflicted about John the Baptist. On one hand, Herod is furious that John has publicly admonished him for snatching away his brother’s wife and marrying her, so he had John arrested and thrown into prison. On the other hand, Herod admires John as a righteous and holy man who has the courage to cast danger aside and declare his convictions.

When his birthday rolls around, Herod puts on a spectacular banquet and invites his courtiers, his officers, and the leaders of Galilee. During the celebration his daughter is the entertainment, and her dancing dazzles the diners.

Bursting at the chest over his daughter’s performance, and perhaps with enough wine to impede his judgment, Herod says to his daughter, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” Carried away with his own grandeur, he bragged, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.”

The girl turns to her mother and says, “What should I ask?” Spewing the venom stirring within her, Herodias blurts out, “Ask for the head of John the Baptist.”

Herod wields such power that he can grant whatever someone wishes, but then becomes trapped by his own tongue and appears too feeble to prevent a heinous act. The trigger behind the tragedy is his bitter wife, Herodias, who will stop at nothing to silence her critic and who must turn to devious means to have her crime carried out.

Herod faced a stark choice. Should he carry out the wish of his wife and murder John the Baptist? In doing so, he would show that he is a man of his word, he would satisfy his wife, and he would show himself a force with which to be reckoned. Or, should Herod spare the life of this bold prophet from the wilderness?

His father, Herod the Great, had built his reputation on his ruthlessness, disposing not only of adversaries, but one of his wives, her two sons and her brother. Would Herod Antipas follow in the bloody footsteps of his father and rule by fear, or would he muster the moral courage to extend mercy?

I have no doubt that if any of us were faced with the decision to bolster our image or to save someone's life, we would show mercy. However, most of us can likely recall a time when the pressure of peers compelled us to make a bad decision.

Herod can spare John's life, but his pride will not allow him to renege on his boast to grant any wish. He has invited "the brass and the bluebloods"<sup>1</sup> to his grand celebration, and he is intent on presenting himself as a mighty and decisive ruler – no matter the fallout.

Herod orders one of his soldiers to carry out the dastardly deed and there, in Herod's fortress in present day Jordan, the head of John is delivered on a platter. When John's followers received word of the grisly execution, they retrieve his body and lay it in a tomb.

Herod was haunted by his decision to kill John the Baptist, because when word begins to spread about Jesus and his amazing powers, the first reaction of Herod is to say that John the Baptist has been raised from the dead.

The beheading of John the Baptist forces us to bring the pain and suffering and injustice of the world into our sanctuary. It reminds us that the Bible is filled with neither wishful thinking nor blind optimism, and the Christian faith is not based on a naïve view of the world. Bad things, horrific things, unforgivable things happen to good people.

A colleague writes, "What bothers me about John the Baptist's death – its gruesomeness notwithstanding – is its utter senselessness. John dies at the whim of a clueless teenager. He dies because a powerful woman has a callous heart and a lustful man has a shallow sense of honor. He dies for moral cowardice. He dies for a dance."<sup>2</sup>

One of the harsh realities of life is that being faithful to God, being absolutely committed to God's will, does not protect you from evil. Just look at Jesus or Paul or Peter. Look at Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, or Martin Luther King, Jr.

The gospel writer's placing of this story says a lot about life as we experience it. The story that immediately precedes it is the one we studied last Sunday. That story ended with Jesus sending out his disciples, and the final verse read: "They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." Then, on the heels of that success story, the writer tells of the beheading of John the Baptist.

These two back-to-back stories portray life as we know it. No matter how wonderful life is unfolding for us – marvelous job, terrific children, good friends, and opportunities to travel – there is always other news. "We interrupt this program to report on the latest mass shooting, the explosion of drug overdoses, the almost 3,000 young immigrant children taken from their parents, the latest terrorist attack, the tens of millions of refugees..."

The constant drumbeat of horrible news has a numbing effect and you cannot justify every tragedy by arguing that it happened so that something better could come about. When a child dies or an earthquake wipes out thousands, it cannot be morphed into a story that had a purpose. Sometimes suffering is simply dreadful and an occasion to mourn.

There are some things in life that are so painful, cruel, and unjust, that you never make peace with them. You ask God to give you the strength to carry them and you pray that God's healing balm will prevent your bitterness from poisoning your soul. St. Teresa of Avila said, "If Christ Jesus dwells in a person as his friend and noble leader, that person can endure all things, for Christ helps and strengthens us and never abandons us."

The powers of darkness have not yet surrendered. Thus, suffering and death still have their days. Yet, we still believe that God brings light out of darkness and life out of death, so we persevere and we live in defiance of all that seeks to destroy.

The pastor of a church in North Carolina received a birdhouse as gift from one of his neighbors. He says “It was the perfect size for bluebirds to build their nest inside. He put it on a wood post in his yard, which turned out to be a bad idea. Neighborhood cats dug their claws into the wood, climbed up the post and killed the newborn birds. The nest became a grave.”

“He replaced the wooden post with a metal pole and the bluebirds came back, rebuilt their nest, and had babies. They took turns watching the chicks as the other one gathered food.”

He says, “This is what hope looks like, stubborn hope – bluebirds coming back and making space for life in the midst of a world of death. And that’s what the gospel is all about: God makes room for eternal life to grow and for divine love to multiply even in the valley of the shadow of death. The hope of Easter is that not even crucifixion can put an end to God’s work of making space for life in the world. God turns a grave into a place for new birth.”<sup>3</sup>

When we commit ourselves to following Jesus, we declare that in the end, violence and injustice and suffering will be no more, because love and peace and mercy will prevail. Such faith allows us to persevere in a world of both monsters and saints, anguish and joy, tragedy and triumph. Further, we dare to adopt the words of the Apostle Paul as our own: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us.” (Romans 8:18)

Educator Jonathan Kozol tells the story of Anthony who was raised by a single mother in the Bronx. Shortly before they met, Anthony’s young uncle had been murdered by a rival gang. Against all odds, Anthony became determined not to be swept up in the violence that swirled all around him. Anthony was attracted to the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe and his favorite poem was “The Raven,” with its famous repetition of the word: “Nevermore.”

Kozol’s curiosity about Anthony’s resilience in the midst of so much suffering and loss led him to ask Anthony to describe his vision of heaven. Anthony wrote on a sheet of paper: “No violence will there be in heaven, no guns or drugs or the IRS. If you still feel lonely in your heart, or bitterness, you’ll know that you are not there yet... No one will look at you from the outside. People will see you from the inside. All the people from the street will be there. You’ll recognize all the children who have died when they were little. God will be there. God will be happy that we have arrived.”

On the top of the sheet of paper Anthony had scrawled “Check out the back!” When Kozol turned the page over, he saw a drawing of a raven with the word emerging from its mouth: “Nevermore.” It turns out that at the funeral for his young uncle, Anthony had been asked to read from the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Revelation. “And on that day there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Nevermore will there be any suffering. Nevermore will there be any pain. Nevermore will there be any tears. For God will wipe away what tears are left in their eyes.”<sup>4</sup>

This is the vision by which we live and the hope to which we cling.

#### NOTES

1. *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*
2. Debie Thomas, “Bearable Stories,” *JourneyWithJesus.net*, for July 15, 2018.
3. Isaac S. Villegas, “Reflections on the Lectionary,” *Christian Century*, April 15, 2015.
4. Agnes Norfleet, “Long Before and Long After,” November 3, 2013 (She was quoting from Lisa Nichols Hickman, *The Worshiping Life*, p. 54-55).

## Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Grace and Glory —

You are Lord of heaven and earth! In glory, you set the stars in their courses; in grace you fashioned humankind in your image. In love, you called us to life with you.

Still you call — inviting us to enjoy the work of your hands, commanding us to care for all you have made, beckoning us — time and again — into your presence.

Like our forebears, we turn from your embrace and disrupt your creation. But, across time and space, your grace and glory persist!

Sending God — send us again, we pray. There is much in this world that tears away at your vision for creation. But we trust that you are always at work to renew, to restore, to redeem. Pour out power upon your people, that we might follow your Spirit's leading and be instruments of healing and reconciliation in your world.

We have seen that the journey of faith is not easy. Sometimes we must traverse shadowed valleys, where we wonder if your light will ever pierce the darkness. Sometimes we find ourselves lost in the wilderness, unsure where to turn and yearning for guidance. Sometimes we are sailing stormy seas, hoping that you will — once again — rescue us from the wind and the waves. Sometimes we set out to walk the way of the cross, but discover more risk than we ever imagined.

Yet, you — O God — are our constant companion. When grief is sure to consume us, you offer comfort; when chaos threatens to overtake us, you offer peace. Ever-faithful — you fill us with courage to confront injustice, and with hope to sustain us in the midst of trial. You free us from fear, and liberate us to love. And — in the fullness of time — you lead us beside still waters that restore our souls and bear witness to your goodness and mercy.

In the stillness of this hour, draw near to us and assure us of your presence. Open our eyes to glimpse your glory and our hearts to receive your grace. And sustain us for the journey of faith. As we go forth, grant us wisdom and courage that we might be bold disciples, faithful witnesses, and eager partners in your holy work.

This we pray in the name of your son, our Lord — the one who taught us how to pray:

**Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.**