

April 6, 2014
The Life of John the Baptist

John's Death

Matthew 14:1-12/ Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Opening words: Lent is the Christian season of preparation prior to Easter. Excluding Sundays, it lasts for 40 days. The number forty is one of those sacred numbers in the Bible. If you don't believe me, then remember these stories. It rained for 40 days and nights in Noah's story. The Hebrews wandered for 40 years in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. Jesus fasted 40 days before being tempted by Satan in the wilderness. The resurrected Jesus walked the face of this world for 40 days before ascending into heaven. This year, Easter is April 20, so Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, was March 5.

Lent is the time to examine yourself and discover what is holding you back for a closer walk with God. It is easy to see the imperfections in others and be blind to our own. We look good next to the cast of characters on the evening news wearing the orange jump suits. However, comparing ourselves to Jesus is another story. Our imperfections are suddenly clear. The Wesleyan tradition has always encouraged us to strive toward perfection. We should never be satisfied with our present state, because none of us is perfect.

We have come to the end of my sermon series, *The Life of John the Baptist*. If you have been with me every week, then you will remember where we have been. We have looked at John's birth, his message, and his question. We have also looked at Jesus's baptism. On Pentecost Sunday, June 8, we will look at John's legacy. However, today we are going to look at John's death. For this reason, let me call this message, *John's Death*. May God give you ears to hear this morning's Gospel lesson, Matthew 14:1-12.

Matthew 14:1-12 ¹At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, ²and he said to his attendants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him." ³Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, ⁴for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her." ⁵Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet. ⁶On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much ⁷that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. ⁸Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist." ⁹The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted ¹⁰and had John beheaded in the prison. ¹¹His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. ¹²John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

One of the most magnificent places in the world is the cathedral in Milan, Italy. Worshippers are welcomed by three magnificent doorways. Over the first one is carved a beautiful wreath of roses, and underneath it is the legend, "All which pleases is just for a moment." Over the second is sculptured a cross, and the words, "All that troubles is just for a moment." But underneath the great central entrance to the main aisle is the inscription, "That only is important which is eternal." The message is clear. We should live for the permanent and the eternal. How much time do you spend worrying about the temporary? How much time do you spend worrying about the eternal? The only things that really matter are those things that will matter in 100 years. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves this morning in the fourteenth chapter of Matthew. There is no other way to say it. John's life is near the end. He has made enemies in high places. You remember the story. I told it to you last week. John's life had moved from the openness of the wilderness to the smallness of a prison cell. Refusing to soften the truth for any man, John offends the political leader of his little corner of the world, Herod Antipas. (He was one of the sons of the Herod in the Nativity.) His story sounds like the storyline from a contemporary soap opera. Herod went to Rome to visit his brother and became infatuated with his sister-in-law, Herodias. He seduced her, took her home as his own, and divorced his wife. (That would be like me seducing and marrying my sister-in-law, Sue. I'm sorry! I just went blind for a second.) That story is wrong at so many levels. Herod's subjects learned about his behavior and made it common knowledge. Everyone knew the story, even John the Baptist. He pronounced Herod's behavior as morally wrong. Trying to silence John's protests, Herod has him imprisoned near the Dead Sea. That takes us to today's lesson.

According to the text, Herod was intimidated by John the Baptist. For this reason, he was afraid to execute him. Even with his hard heart, Herod knew there was something special about John. Herod must have intended to leave John in that prison for the rest of his life. That plan changed because of peer pressure. The scene is not pretty. It takes Herod to a new low. It happened during his own birthday party. The entertainment for that evening was Herodias's daughter. That makes her Herod's niece. She dances for her uncle and that pleases him. It was not the dance of an innocent child. It was an erotic dance. The combination of alcohol and hormones produced an unexpected request. Herod told her she could have whatever she wanted. Herod expected the answer to be a pony and a piece of jewelry. He never expected her to answer, "The head of John the Baptist on a platter." There is no easy way to say it. By the end of the evening, John's head was delivered to Herodias and the great man of God was silenced forever. His death is so shocking that we are almost blinded from the divine truth. What does the death of John the Baptist teach us? How does this deadly story help us be a little more like Jesus every day? This is the answer. Listen to what I am about to say.

The life of John the Baptist and the life of Herod Antipas stand in complete contrast. John lived preoccupied with the eternal. Herod Antipas lived preoccupied with the temporary. John lived his entire life trying to please God. Herod Antipas lived his entire life trying to please himself. This is the key line in the whole message. John the Baptist and Herod Antipas had completely different priorities. This story challenges us to examine our own priorities. It is just like the doors at the cathedral in Milan. How much time do you spend worrying about the temporary? How much time do you spend worrying about the eternal? The only things that really matter are those things that will matter in 100 years. If you are ready to begin, then say, **"Amen!"**

On Tuesday morning, I called my good friend, Bill Johnson. (No, not the Congressman, the preacher.) I wanted to tell him I was a grandfather! He didn't answer at first but called me back a few minutes later. In a whisper Bill asked, "What's up!" I told him I was a grandfather and I told him Pippa was just perfect. He whispered back, "That's great! Congratulations!" I said, "Bill, why are you whispering?" Bill responded, "I am at the Abbey of the Genesee near Rochester, New York. I'm only to use my electronic devices in case of an emergency. I am supposed to be focused on God." I said, "Bill, I am not an emergency." He said, "No. However, you are a priority." I asked, "Do you answer when the wife calls." He said, "Yes! I talked to her this morning." He added, "I think I am in trouble. They caught me using my iPad to see if the Indians won last night." Bill illustrates for us the simple point that good things can take our attention away from God. God is supposed to be our top priority. That is what the Old Testament lesson taught us. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) There is nothing wrong with friends and family. There is nothing really wrong with your favorite professional sports team. However, none of those things are God. God is supposed to be our top priority. How many good things in your life are distracting you from God? What is the top priority in your life? Is it God, or is it something that is just a good thing? If that make you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Nationality

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) was a French political thinker and writer. In 1831 he came to America and wrote these words. They may sound familiar. He said:

I sought for the greatness of the United States in her commodious harbors, her ample rivers, her fertile fields, and boundless forests--and it was not there. I sought for it in her rich mines, her vast world commerce, her public school system, and in her institutions of higher learning--and it was not there. I looked for it in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution--and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great!

Can I tell you the truth? With all the problems our country is facing, America is still good! There is so much to love about America! I have been to some amazing places in this world, but there is no place like America. I always feel a sense of relief when I am flying home and figure out I am in U.S. air space. There is so much good about America. There are so many opportunities in America. I am both proud and thankful to be an American. It would be easy to make America my top priority. There is only one problem. America is not God. Do you know how many times the name "The United States of America" is mentioned in the Bible? Zero. Being patriotic is good, but it is not good enough. Herod was patriotic. He was the Roman tetrarch. In other words, he was the governor. Being patriotic was in his job description. God must be your top priority!

Church

It was just about a year ago that the Coitsville Presbyterian Church held their last worship service. After 177 years, the church closed. It always saddens me to hear of a closed church. Do you know any church that has closed? Do you know of any church that will close in the near future? My heart goes out to those final few parishioners. They are the ones who labored to keep it opened. They are the ones who had to decide to close. When you close a church, you are walking away from so much. Churches are more than buildings. They are relationships. Your grandmother sold pies to buy the pews. Your grandfather helped roof the church on the hottest day that summer. In the sanctuary you buried your brother who left us too soon. You said those marriage vows when you found your one true love. You baptized your children before they could walk. Years later, you can still point to the place at the kneeling rail where you accepted Jesus. You still remember how the whole church prayed just for you before your big medical test. The fellowship hall is filled with memories of past church gatherings and heated church meetings. There was a time when church wasn't just part of your life, because it was your life.

There is so much to love about the church! It is easy to make a church the top priority in your life. However, this is the truth. The church is not God. The church is an organization to teach you about God. It is an organization which exists to make you a little more like Jesus every day. Being faithful to your church is a good thing, but it is not the best thing. God must be your top priority!

Family

Monday was one of those red letter days in my life. After eighteen and a half hours of labor, my daughter gave birth to her first child, Pippa Rose. We had been waiting for the news all day to come to the hospital. Sarah and her husband, Vic, wanted to welcome her into the world alone. The "very youthful" grandparents waited at home patiently. (We jumped with every text and phone call.) When I saw her for the first time I couldn't believe it. I find all babies simply miraculous. Pippa is perfect. I thought about that old preaching line that says babies are a reminder that God wants the world to go on. When I held her the first time I studied every inch of her. I could not be more pleased or proud.

It is amazing that a life that didn't exist a year ago suddenly became such a priority to me. I am no different than you. I could not be more proud of my family. I have a beautiful granddaughter. I can't wait to get to know her. I have a great son-in-law, who I respect. I have wonderful daughters who I refuse to disappoint. I have a wife who has shown me the world and made me a better man. It isn't just true of me. It is true of you.

There is so much to love about our families! Everything we have would mean nothing without them. It is easy to make them our top priority. However, this is the truth. Our families aren't God. In the Gospel lesson for today, Herod's family was a priority. Family is a priority. They are one of God's greatest blessings. They are a good thing, but they aren't the best thing. God must be your top priority! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Let me end with this story. I love it. A group of friends went deer hunting and paired off in twos for the day. That night one of the hunters returned alone, staggering under an eight-point buck. "Where's Harry?" he was asked. "Harry had a stroke of some kind. He's a couple of miles back up the trail." "You left Harry laying there, and carried the deer back?" "Well," said the hunter, "I figured no one was going to steal Harry." It is a story of priorities.

What is your top priority? Is God your top priority or something else that is just good? There is a lot of good things in the world. However, none of them is God. John the Baptist made God his top priority. He applied Deuteronomy 6:5 to his life. I hope you do the same. It says, *Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*"

Will you pray with me?