

I hadn't expected to start this sermon by talking about political violence or reading a statement from our Presiding Bishop, but these days, it seems like unexpected things are happening more frequently than usual. By now you all have probably heard that someone took a shot at former president and current candidate Donald Trump at one of his rallies. Trump only suffered a wound to the top of his ear, but someone attending the rally was killed, as was the shooter. Biden, Obama, and Trump himself have all released statements, and I commend those to your attention. Many others, of course, are also weighing in. As usual, I can do no better than Michael Curry, who said:

"The way of love—not the way of violence—is the way we bind up our nation's wounds. We decry political violence in any form, and our call as followers of Jesus of Nazareth is always to love. We pray for the families of those who were killed. We pray for former President Trump and his family and for all who were harmed or impacted by this incident. I pray that we as a nation and a world may see each other as the beloved children of God."\*

Amen.

Today's Gospel is an explicit reminder that political violence is nothing new, and of course the Old Testament has far more examples of political violence, subterfuge, mayhem, and general insanity. Militant atheists will sometimes try to portray those passages as if they were God's will, or instructions for God's followers. I shouldn't have to say this, but that is a blatant and evil lie. As one of my seminary professors said, "Scripture is messy because life is messy. Scripture is violent because humanity is violent." A Bible that did not reflect the hard truths of life and human nature would not be able to speak to them, would not be able to communicate to us a better way: God's way.

So it's important that we not ignore this gory little story, the one flashback in Mark's Gospel, as much as we might want to. This story echoes stories that Mark's readers would have known well, like Jephthah promising to sacrifice the first person who walked out of his house and seeing his daughter emerge, or Queen Esther taking advantage of the king's offer to give her anything she asked and using that promise to avert the extermination of all the Jews in the kingdom. Herod even mentions Elijah, "another prophet who collided with another weak king manipulated by another murderous wife."\*\* And of course it foreshadows Jesus's own passion and death, and the martyrdom of many early Christians.

St. Mark isn't just showing us that Jesus's enemies are playing for keeps. This is more than the obligatory scene in a Star Trek episode, where a minor character in a red shirt gets vaporized, or in a Bond movie, where the villain demonstrates an exotic weapon. The needless death of a prophet is horrible in itself, but it isn't the worst thing about this story. Because this is Mark showing us a world that has rejected God, intentionally, and definitively. It is, therefore, a world without grace, love, or mercy; a world from which Jesus is conspicuously absent; a world driven by greed and fear, with

dashes of lust, pretension, and insecurity, and a fundamental disregard for human life. And Mark shows us that all this awfulness is completely unnecessary, and thus, all the more outrageous.

This flashback also connects with sharply contrasting stories that Mark places immediately before and after. Just before was the story of Jesus sending the twelve disciples on their first missionary journey, which we heard last week. They went out proclaiming Jesus's message and accomplishing wonderful things. Just after comes the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. Mark is hammering home the difference between life lived according to God's ways and life lived in rejection of God's ways.

Mark is also showing, in this contrast, the weight of responsibility God places on each of us by giving us the ability to make choices for ourselves. John the Baptist, King Herod, Jesus, and Jesus's disciples were all Jewish, all of them knew God's law and were obligated to follow it. Herod may have done so superficially, when it suited him, to maintain an image, but John, Jesus, and their disciples kept the Law truly, zealously, with all their hearts, and that creates the real difference.

Superficially we see a contrast between a king holding the power of life and death at a lavish royal banquet and a handful of peasants wandering in a poor, rural backwater. But on a deeper level we see the outcomes of different life choices. Look a little closer and you see the rich king is foolish, while Jesus, the truly great king, is materially poor, but rich in spirit, grace, and wisdom. We see Herod show his true colors. He is too weak to stand up to a little girl, even when she asks him to kill a good man, even a man the king enjoyed listening to. And all Herod had to do was say, I'm sorry, but the Ten Commandments forbid murder, and obeying a commandment from God is more important than keeping a promise. It would have been hypocritical of him—and therefore entirely keeping with Herod's character—but chances are, that would have been the end of it.

Contrast Herod's lavish but toxic royal court with the wonderful things Jesus and his disciples accomplished with very limited resources: healing many, feeding many more, and proclaiming the good news of God's love, hope, and salvation to all. They did these things by exercising their own initiative and agency, in the course of lives they chose to dedicate to God. So, clearly, if we trust in God, we all can get... ahead?

Whoever the shooter was yesterday, it was probably someone who felt powerless and was determined to feel powerful, someone who utterly abandoned both empathy and reason. You and I may not feel like we are especially powerful people, but we abide under the ultimate and cosmic power of God, who is wisdom and love, and calls all people to live according to wisdom and love. We may feel powerless sometimes, but we have blessings, options, and resources the first Christians never would have dreamt of. God gives us these things because God loves us, and made us in God's image, with free will. God sent Jesus to show us how to use the gifts of God wisely, show us how to expand God's love in the world by following his way of love and

living together in peace, with integrity and the purpose of our individual callings. There is no better way to live than by following Jesus, “who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.”

\*<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/statement-from-presiding-bishop-michael-curry-on-trump-rally-shooting/>

\*\*[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2503](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2503)