

Sermon Dorset July 11, 2021 Proper 10 Year B
Witnesses in Death and in Life”
Rev. Jordan (Skip) Dickinson

SCRIPTURE LESSONS

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 85:8-13

L: Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

P: *Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell it in our land.*

L: Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

P: *Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.*

L: The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yields its increase.

P: *Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.*

Amos 7:7-15

⁷ This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸ And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said,

“See, I am setting a plumb line
in the midst of my people Israel;
I will never again pass them by;

⁹ the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,
and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,
and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

Amaziah Complains to the King

¹⁰ Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹ For thus Amos has said,

‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword,
and Israel must go into exile
away from his land.’”

¹² And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³ but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

¹⁴ Then Amos answered Amaziah, “I am^[a] no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am^[b] a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, ¹⁵ and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’

Mark 6:14-29 The Death of John the Baptist

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’^[a] name had become known. Some were^[b] saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” ¹⁵ But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” ¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

¹⁷ For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod^[c] had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” ¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed;^[d] and yet he liked to listen to him. ²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²² When his daughter Herodias^[d] [HYPERLINK](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark++6%3A14-29&version=NRSV)

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[29&version=NRSV](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark++6%3A14-29&version=NRSV)" ^{e]} came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” ²³ And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.” ²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the

baptizer.”²⁵ Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”²⁶ The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.²⁷ Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s^[f] head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, **28** brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.²⁹ When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Let us pray: ‘Lord, we give thanks for the faithful who have gone before us. Strengthen us by their witness of courage and help us live lives that might encourage those who long for the gift of faith.’ Amen.

I did not think of an appropriate joke when preparing to preach on today’s text, but this past Monday Derry and I were talking on the phone with our older son in Florida. When I told him what I planned to preach about on Sunday, his comment was “Don’t lose your head over this, Dad.”

It is not easy to preach on the death of John the Baptist in the middle of the summer, in July or at any time. A “text of terror” isn’t for light summer reading. This story in Mark is the gospel lectionary reading for this Sunday.

We are brought us face to face with the dark side of human life in today’s scripture, in this case Herod’s adultery with his brother’s wife, and the imprisonment and shocking execution of John the Baptist.

Matthew, Mark, Luke & John all hold that encountering John the Baptist is necessary for us to hear the good news about Jesus. But John the Baptist’s story – like Jesus’ story—is not all good. John dies a violent death, which was the direct result of the way he lived. He spoke truth to those in power and suffered the consequences.

Last Sunday we heard about Jesus facing opposition in his hometown, and then his sending out the twelve disciples - without him, but two by two, - to carry out the mission of healing and delivering people from their demons. The disciples proclaim that all should repent -- a message that John the Baptizer emphasized in his prophecy.

Our story in Mark opens with wondering regarding the source of the power of Jesus and his disciples. Where does this power come from? and the story ends with John’s disciples claiming his body and giving John a faithful burial.

In retelling Mark’s story, I use some passages from *The Message, The New Testament in Contemporary Language* by Eugene Peterson.

1. John challenged people to repent; to change their moral compass. He called on people to show fruits of repentance in their lives and to flee the wrath to come.
2. Specifically, John is in prison because he spoke God's judgment against Herod who committed adultery by divorcing his wife and marrying Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip.
3. Because of this, Herodias, nursed a deep grudge against John the Baptist, and wanted to kill him.
4. But she could not, for **Herod feared (and was in awe of) John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him.**
We get a glimpse of Herod's humanity here.
5. **But a portentous day arrived** when Herod threw a birthday party inviting all the brass and bluebloods in Galilee. Along with the food, the wine must have flowed freely.
6. Herodias' daughter (Salome) entered the banquet hall and danced for the guests. She dazzled Herod and the guests.
7. Herod said to the girl, "Ask me anything. I'll give you anything you want. Carried away. He kept on, "I swear, I'll split my kingdom with you if you say so."
Actually, Herod did not have a kingdom to divide. Mark calls him king perhaps from local custom. Under Roman rule Herod was a "tetrarch", the ruler of Galilee and Peraea (Perea) the land on the other side of the Jordan where John the Baptist preached and baptized.
8. Salome went back to her mother and said, "What shall I ask for?" "Ask for the head of John the Baptizer."
9. Excited, she ran back to the king and said, "I want the head of John the Baptizer served up on a platter. And I want it now!"
10. **That sobered the king up fast.** (Our scripture reading puts it) **The king was deeply grieved;** But unwilling to lose face with his guests, he caved in and let her have her wish.
11. Herod sent the executioner off to the prison with orders to bring back John's head. He went, cut off John's head, brought it back on a platter, and presented it to the girl, who gave it to her mother.
12. When John's disciples heard about this, they came and got the body and gave it a decent burial.

John the Baptist's death affected Jesus and the people of Galilee, reminding them all that speaking truth to those in power was dangerous.

Yet Jesus went fearlessly forward with his ministry of proclaiming God's kingdom.

Like a cloud of witnesses, we are surrounded by many martyrs who have gone before us in witnessing to God's justice and truth in our world.

Stephen, one of the first deacons in the church, was the first in a long line of Christian martyrs. He looked on those who were about to kill him by stoning and asked the Lord to forgive them. (Acts 7:60). His courageous nonviolence in the face of death resembled that of Christ.

Suffering and martyrdom, which means witnessing by sacrificing one's life, has been part of the experience of the Jesus movement and the church through many generations and to the present.

One example: In the 1930 and 40s German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a leader of the Confessing Church in Germany, in contrast to the State Church which saw themselves as German Christians.

Bonhoeffer spoke and wrote about the **Cost of Discipleship** that is involved in following Jesus. Seeing the evil of Nazism clearly, he joined the plot to assassinate Hitler. But he never attempted to justify his involvement as right. He insisted that his act was a sin, and threw himself on the mercy of God.

Bonhoeffer was imprisoned by the Gestapo, and was himself put to death by hanging as the Russian army advanced upon the area where he was held.

His *Letters and Papers from Prison* were smuggled out by friendly guards, and were published, and had a great impact on readers after the war.

Another example. On December 2, 1980, four Catholic Sisters: Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan were murdered by officers of the Salvadoran military. As Catholic missionary Sisters serving among the poor during El Salvador's civil war, these women knew as Ita Ford said the night before she died, that "one who is committed to the poor must risk the same fate as the poor." Their deaths deeply affected the North American churches, Catholic and Protestant, galvanizing opposition to US support for the Salvadoran government's repression of its own people.

The deaths were not over. The following year in December of 1981, scores of Salvadoran troops from a US-trained Battalion occupied the town of El Mozote in rural El Salvador, interrogating its citizens about the whereabouts of guerilla troops suspected to be in the area. The residents of El Mozote, many of them born-again evangelical Christians, were known to be **neutral** in the conflict between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN resistance, yet **nearly one thousand men, women, and children** were systematically killed in the largest massacre of modern Latin American history.

The inscription on a memorial in El Mozote's town square reads,

"They did not die, they are with us, with you, and with all humanity."

Our hands are not clean in the support our country gave at that time to the repressive policies of the El Salvadoran government and armed forces.

An officer in the US Army who was a member of the UCC Church we served in northern Virginia, resigned his commission rather than accept deployment in that war. He spoke Spanish and was within a few months of receiving his twenty- year pension.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote, "The first form of rulers in the world were the tyrants, the last will be the martyrs. (They both have **the power to compel.**) The tyrant, himself ambitious to dominate, compels people through his power; the martyr, him or herself unconditionally obedient to God, compels others through his or her suffering. The tyrants die and their rule is over; **the martyrs die and their rule begins.**"

John the Baptizer is linked to the Hebrew prophets like Amos before him.

Amos was a sheep herder when God called him to speak God's word to Israel.

It was a time in Israel when rulers and some people had become wealthy, and pressed down the many who were poor. Amos denounced Israel, as well as its neighbors, for their reliance of military might, and for grave injustice in social dealings, for abhorrent immorality, and shallow, meaningless worship and piety. Amos proclaimed: **“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”**

God gave to Amos visions of disaster if the people did not change.

“Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel.”

Acknowledging the cloud of witnesses who have died and lived before us, **we are called to see the plumb line of God’s justice re-established** and made real at the center of our nation, and at the center of our own living.

We are called to NOT ignore the poor and disadvantaged in our midst.

God’s prophets confront us with the fact of evil in our world. Yet we are given the assurance that we are a part of a community of others who trust God to guide us in the days ahead.

May we not close our hearts to the suffering of others in our world.

Let us be willing to continue to be uncomfortable about the things we can work to change.

It matters how we die and how we live for so we witness to God’s faithfulness

Sojourner Truth has the last word.

As a 19th century abolitionist and former slave, she said,

“I’m not going to die, honey. I’m going home like a shooting star.”

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

7-11-2021

As we come together on this Sabbath day, Almighty God, we pray for those far from our little village who have been working hard in the background of our denomination.

Forgive us for our lack of attention to the denomination that joins us together as the United Church of Christ. We pray for our General Minister and President, Rev. John Dorhauer who has guided a large team to ready our leaders for General Synod 33.

Rooted in Love, our delegates including nine from the Vermont Conference and hundreds from Conferences all over the country and missionaries from around the world come together virtually to discuss social justice issues, to act upon resolutions written for the betterment of all, to negotiate important business aspects of our denominational work and most of all to come together to worship our loving, kind and compassionate Lord. Be with them O holy and everlasting Lord as they represent us all.

We pray as reminder of our statement of mission proclaims,

“Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are called and commit ourselves:

To praise God, confess our sin, and joyfully accept God’s forgiveness;

To proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our suffering world;

To embody God's Love for all people;
To hear and give voice to creation's cry for justice and peace;
To name and confront the powers of evil within and among us;
To repent our silence and complicity with the forces of chaos and death;
To preach and teach with the power of the living Word;
To join oppressed and troubled people in the struggle for liberation;
To work for justice, healing, and wholeness of life;
To embrace the unity of Christ's church;
To discern and celebrate the present and coming reign of God.

Give us wisdom and courage O God, for you have bestowed upon us through the words of the Prophet Amos, a plumb line from the foundation of the world to lead us into truth.

Receive our prayers of hope and healing for those on our immediate prayer list including:

We together make up the church, the Body of Christ, we appeal to you for strength as we take this Sabbath rest to renew our spirit and faith so that we may be stirred to action in our coming days. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

OFFERING PRAYER

07-11-2021

INVITATION

The Lord gives what is good and makes a pathway for generosity to follow. Let us walk in the righteousness of Christ as we bring our gifts to God.

DEDICATION

We thank you Lord for filling us with every spiritual grace that we might be a blessing for others. Consecrate the gifts we offer may they bring blessing to others and praise and glory to your Holy Name we pray. Amen.

