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Mark 6:14-29

Year B

July 11, 2021

St. James Episcopal Church

**His Name was John**

The movie, ***In the Line of Fire***, is about a disillusioned and obsessed former CIA agent who attempts to assassinate the President of the United States and the Secret Service agent who tracks him. It stars Clint Eastwood and the would be assassin John Malkovich.

As Malkovich, (who is the suspect), is being questioned after he has been apprehended shares his thoughts with the CIA agent who is interrogating him, the following conversation takes place.

**Malkovich: (Mitch Leary)**

Don't you have a psychological profile on me yet?

**Agent: (Frank Horrigan)**

I don't put a lot of stock in them.

**Malkovich:**

Nor do I. A man's actions don't equal the sum of his psychological parts. Doesn't work that way.

**Agent:**

Just how does it work?

**Malkovich:**

It doesn't work, Frank. God doesn't punish the wicked and reward the righteous. Everyone dies. Some die because they deserve too; others die simply because they come from Minneapolis. It's random and it's meaningless.

**Agent:**

Well, if none of this means anything... why kill the President?

**Malkovich:**

To punctuate the dreariness.

***“God doesn’t punish the wicked and reward the righteous. Everyone dies. Some die because they deserve too; others die simply because they come from Minneapolis. It’s random and meaningless.”***  Mitch Leary

Today’s Gospel text is the text referred to as the beheading of John, and the whole story is quite tragic and ludicrous.

You remember John’s story? Do you remember John’s beginning?

The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and tells him that he will indeed have his longed for son and that this son will bring joy and gladness.

Remember how Elizabeth felt the child leap in her womb when Mary came to visit? How on the day of this child’s circumcision Elizabeth declares, “He is to be called John” and not named after his father? How Zechariah who had been struck mute months earlier reaches to write and states, “His name is John”.

His name is John.

His parents are clear and John absorbs the clarity his parents display in their naming of him. His name is John. He is whom came to prepare the way for Christ. He has a strength of purpose that guides his life. He does not waver from the course that is his life.

His name is John.

John at the end of his life finds himself imprisoned. Herod the king had himself imprisoned him because he had married Herodias, his brother’s wife, and John had told him boldly that it was not lawful for him to marry his brother’s wife.

It is a sordid and age old story - Herod was married to another, divorced her and took his brother’s wife. And John, speaking to his calling, had boldly spoken out against Herod’s actions in marrying her. And so Herodias, the wife, had a grudge against John and wanted to kill him.

John was continuing on in the life to which he was called. Speaking the truth. Preparing a way. And he was imprisoned for it.

The Scripture tells us that Herod, feared John, “Knowing that he was a righteous and holy man and he protected him. When he heard him he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.”

***“When he heard him he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.”***

Have you ever had one of those people in your life? A person that when you listened to them, you were greatly perplexed? One that maybe you did not exactly understand what they were saying, or from what perspective they spoke, but when they spoke, you found yourself drawn to them? Maybe you had a desire to understand them better though you did not understand them?

Herod, the king, protected John because he liked him. He protected him from the wishes of his wife because somehow he was drawn to him — he knew he was different - Herod knew that John was a righteous and holy man.

And this is one of Herod’s great follies as a man — as a leader. Knowing what he knew — he did not have the courage to stand up and act on what he knew was right and what he knew to be true. He knew John was a righteous man and spoke for God, and yet he allowed himself to be influenced by others.

At his birthday banquet, when his daughter came in and danced and pleased him and he offered to give her anything she wanted, when she (at the suggestion of her mother), asked for John the Baptists’ head on a platter, Herod was unable to stand up against her wishes. The Scripture says he was deeply grieved. (But not so grieved that he could stand up and say “You know what, I know what I said, but I am king and I am not granting you that…”) “Because of his oaths and for the guests” it says, he ordered John’s head brought to him on a platter.

John who knew who he was.

His name was John.

He knew from his birth. His parents knew and passed down and reinforced that identity which was already in him.

I don’t think Herod every truly knew who he was. Herodias, his daughter, didn’t know who she was or what she wanted either. She even had to go ask her mother what she should ask for.

It is important to know who we are. It is important to know what we stand for — who we are. And to have the courage to speak to this truth.

John knew who he was.

***“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. (Luke 1:76-78)***

This is sort of a bizarre and strange story. The last thing served at this banquet was John the Baptist’s head on a platter. It is horrific.

But, death does not have the last word in John’s story. John had succeeded in making a way for him who was to come. He had completed his purpose and his call. He himself was not the light, but he pointed to the light.

John had a singleness of purpose. His life attested to it until the end. Even Herod was aware.

What would it be like to be so clear about who we are and why we are here that no one around us would ever doubt it, to be so consumed with a singleness of purpose?

His name was John.

What name is ours? What distinguishes and directs the flow and focus of our lives? What is the purpose we are known for? How do we move more deeply into the self that God created us to be?

Death can be random. And it can even be because we are from Minneapolis. But the purpose for which we live does not have to be.

God grant us courage.

Amen.