

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose

July 12, 2015

“Rise Up”

Dear Friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Yikes. To whoever it was that was on the committee that selected the Revised common lectionary readings for today, I'd like to say, a hearty THANK YOU VERY MUCH. Because really, the beheading of John the Baptist... yuck. And the beheading of John the Baptist on a Sunday when I'm preaching? Double yuck. And the beheading of John the Baptist on a Sunday when I'm preaching and about to take a group of our youth to the ELCA Youth gathering? That's just plain mean.

Poor John the Baptist. He didn't see it coming. He was just doing what he was supposed to do. From the day he was born, he had a job to do. His job was to point the way to Jesus. From the time when he was in his mothers' womb, he leapt for joy at hearing of Jesus. He grew up, pointing the way to Jesus with everything he did. He told people to repent. He baptized them. He told them to get their act together.

John the Baptist also told Herod to get his act together. He used a tiny bit stronger language than that, though. He said that Herod's marriage was an abomination. Here's how it all went down...

Herodias was the wife of Herod's brother Philip, and Herod wanted to marry her. She was divorced from Philip. Herod took her daughter into his household as well. John said it was wrong for Herod to marry Herodias, and that made both Herod and Herodias furious. So Herodias, knowing her husband's eye for beauty and her teenaged daughter's gifts of youth and dancing skill, asked her to dance for her stepfather at his birthday celebration. And what a dance it must have been! Herod was enchanted, and promised her anything she wanted.

Herod did precisely what Herodias predicted and hoped for: he made a promise that she would use. When he made that promise to the girl, she went out of the room and asked her mother "what should I do?" Herodias' answer was swift: "Ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter." A vile dish to request at this birthday banquet...but the girl did as she was told, and Herod was horrified. He had no love for John, whom he viewed as a political activist, a troublemaker, who was rousing the people against him. Still, a head on a platter was particularly awful, even to Herod. But he had no choice but to comply – he had promised, after all, in front of all the guests at the banquet – and he went to the prison where John was being held, beheaded him, and brought back his head, and gave it to Salome. She gave it to her mother. Yuck!

The world doesn't always like those who rise up and speak the truth. I'm sure that you can think of notable people throughout history that have risen up and said hard things that the world needed to hear.

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke in the midst of racial turmoil in the United States. Speaking on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial August 28, 1963 he spoke of a hope in the face of violent racial tension. He said,

“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.... I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor who spoke up in opposition to Hitler and his regime. Bonhoeffer was one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century. A Lutheran pastor, he lived what he preached, actively resisting the Nazis and living in intentional community. He was arrested for his role in an attempt on Hitler's life. He rose up and spoke for what he knew was wrong. He was killed for his integrity.

Look at our world situation right now. We have more division than unity. Race relations in America seem to be at an all-time low. We are in a state of turmoil. We are not very unified. It's almost like my kids, who when they are fighting, stand firm in their beliefs that they are right, even when they are proven wrong because they don't want to be proven wrong. Know what I mean?

Our world needs leaders. Leaders with integrity. Leaders that have Jesus and his radical desire for unity forefront in their mind. Our world needs leaders that aren't afraid of people that are different than them. Our world needs a generation of people who see the cross of Jesus and aren't afraid of the fact that following Jesus means that they will have to do hard things.

At the ELCA National Youth gathering, our youth will learn that as individuals, as communities, as a collective humanity, we are called and claimed as characters in and witnesses to God's divine story, a story that always moves through the cross to the resurrection. They will be touched by God's story unfolding in Detroit. They will return home more aware of their place in God's story, a story enhanced by the stories of others, especially those who are different from them. Ultimately, young people will be encouraged to see themselves as essential witnesses to God's story in the world as they learn to proclaim the beginning of the good news in and through their lives of discipleship, a discipleship marked by their baptismal promises to: • Live among God's faithful people, • Hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, • Proclaim the good news of God in Christ through words and deed, • Serve all people, following the example of Jesus, • Strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

Ultimately, Jesus wasn't a super hero. He wasn't the kind of person that was clamoring for power or prestige. He was a servant.

The powers that Jesus spoke truth to were the religious leaders of the Jews, the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus called them out, exposing their hypocrisy and pronouncing woe upon them for misleading the people. This did not make Jesus very popular with them. They hated Jesus. They had it in for him. They conspired against him and plotted how they could do away with him. Finally, their plans succeeded. They had Jesus arrested, and they sent him over to Pilate, the Roman governor, on some trumped-up charges. They whipped up the mob against Jesus and put the pressure on Pilate to bend to

their will, which he eventually did, even though he knew Jesus was an innocent man. He condemned Jesus to death by crucifixion.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, tattooed and funky ELCA pastor in Colorado who is anything but traditional, says this: "I serve a funky little Lutheran congregation, a liturgical and sacramental emerging church. Someone recently asked, "Do you think the church you planted will, you know, get really big?" I smiled broadly, looking up at the sky and then back at my friend. "Um," I said, "well...no." She looked at me, shocked at my seemingly low self-esteem. "There's just not a huge market for the message 'Jesus bids you come and die'," I explained. "People don't exactly line up around the block for that. But 'Jesus wants to make you rich!' seems to be doing really well right now." It's easy enough to understand the attraction. On some level we all want to be victorious, successful and wealthy. So if someone is willing to tell me that Jesus happens to also want that for us, well, sign me up! That's good news. Except that it isn't. It's not good news, just tempting news. Jesus knew that. He knew how tempted people would be to hop on the Superman-miracle-worker-healer-rock-star bandwagon. This is why in Mark Jesus keeps instructing people not to not tell anyone about the healings and miracles—because there is no way to know what this God/man is about based only on miracles. We only see who he is when we look upon the cross. The problem is that we'll choose the miracles every time."

Does that resonate with you? You see friends, we live in a very broken world. The world is locked in endless cycles of death and destruction. We are always going to mess up. Something has to break through to this world of ours. Something has to snap these destructive cycles. Something has to narrate a different story and point in a different direction. Thanks be to God that we know what that "Something" is: it is the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord, the Son of God who became the servant of all. Because of Jesus, the bottom line of our lives does not need to be something like the sad spectacle with which this story ends as John's devastated disciples sadly bury his headless corpse. Because of the gospel, the end of the story is finally resurrection, restoration, and the everlasting cry, "Behold, I make all things new!"

Because of Jesus, everything IS being made new.

Because of Jesus, we don't need to be afraid.

Because of Jesus, death doesn't have the last word.

Because of Jesus, we are sent on to share Gods love with the world.

Rise up, ELCA National youth gathering team!

Rise up, First Lutheran Church!

Rise up, Fergus Falls!

Thanks be to God. Amen.