

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 16, 2006

Reflection: "In those vernal seasons of the year, when the air is calm and pleasant, it were an injury and sullenness against nature not to go out and see her riches, and partake in her rejoicing with heaven and earth." John Milton

Readings: 2 Samuel: 6: 1 – 5, 12b - 19
Mark 6: 14 - 29

Hymns: Hymn #106 Alleluia! Alleluia! Give Thanks
Hymn #276 Great Is Thy Faithfulness
Hymn #540 God Be With You Till We Meet Again

Living Into the Celebration
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Have you ever been embarrassed by someone?

It was summer session a few years back. We were having one of several presentations by the children of their reading skills in front of parents and guardians. At this particular meeting, our superintendent was taking it all in. At the end of the children's readings, he congratulated them, telling them what wonderful work they were doing. A hand of one of second grader shot up.

"Yes, young man, what's your question?" asked the superintendent.

"What's that thing on your neck," said the seven-year old, referring to a large port-wine birth mark just above the superintendent's collar.

The air pretty much left the room as everyone inhaled, aghast at the comment, wincing a bit, wondering what was going to happen next, mortified by what had just taken place. The superintendent handled it all with aplomb and perfect, answering the question in a way that never let the kid feel as though he had done anything wrong and let the rest of us breathe, once a gain, before the sweat really began to roll.

Michal certainly was embarrassed by King David in this morning's reading of Samuel. David had just come from what we are told was a mighty victory in battle. He went to Ballae-judah to pick up the Ark of the Covenant and bring it into Jerusalem. Ecstatic and humbled in the presence of the Ark, David had torn off most of his clothing, leading the procession in the great celebration – wearing nothing but an ephod – an elaborate undergarment worn by high priests. It was a sight, for sure!

And Michal, – the daughter of Saul who was one of David's wives, looked out the window from her residence, saw this spectacle that the king was making of himself, and – as the text says – she despised him in her heart.

Now, chances are that Michal despised David long before this point. There is a confirmed history of Michal being used as chattel in the throne politics of the time. But, some authors make the point that Michal like Saul – found it important to maintain their royal authority and demeanor at all costs. David's free and spontaneous response to the Spirit was humiliating to his wife, and the throne, and memory of her father.

As much as David was a troubling figure in many ways, he seems to have it right in this narrative. In a collection of 1950's essays on Old Testament Study, H.H. Rowley puts it like this: (forgive the gender references of the early 50's)

YHWH makes all things new, repeating his original triumph over the primeval chaos and His work in creation. All this is expressed in a ritual drama in which YHWH triumphs over the kings and the nations of the earth, who are the allies of the primeval chaos – and in a procession, at which the ark as the symbol of YHWH's presence is borne in triumph to the sanctuary, there he is acclaimed afresh as the proven, universal King. In this way, YHWH vindicates the faith of His chosen people, sees that ... they are made right once again, and, renewing His covenant with them and the House of David as represented by the reigning king, shows himself prepared to restore their fortunes for the upcoming year.

According to these views, David initiated what was to become an annual tradition. A sort of “New Year’s” event, at which time the contract / the covenant with God was re-established with the re-enactment of the Ark being brought into Jerusalem – the City of David.

Whether or not this is so, what is clear is the longing of the people for God and celebration! The fighting and turmoil caused by the allies of chaos were smote in God’s name, and they believed, with God’s direct intervention. They had the Balm of Gilead, embraced the Blessed Assurance. Oh, God was good! War torn and strife weary no more. Well, until the next battle... And, in many ways, much of this reflects our times...

War torn and strife weary... headlines from this morning’s news:

Israel tightens noose around Lebanon: Out of Beirut: Waves of warplanes thundering through the darkness bombed Beirut’s southern suburbs for hours early Sunday, and Hezbollah rocket attacks killed at least nine people in Israel’s third largest city (Haifa). Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmet warned there would be “far-reaching consequences” for the rocket attack.

Bush and Putin Spar at G8 Summit: St. Petersburg, Russia: In a chilly summit prelude, U.S. President George W. Bush blocked Russia’s entry into the World Trade Organization on Saturday and Russian President Vladimir Putin mockingly said Moscow doesn’t want the kind of violence-plagued democracy the United States has fostered in Iraq. (July 15)

At Least 31 seized at Iraq Olympic Meeting: Baghdad, Iraq: Gunmen kidnapped the chairman of Iraq’s Olympic committee and at least 30 others Saturday in a brazen daylight raid on a sports conference in the heart of Baghdad. The abduction came a day after Iraq’s national wrestling team withdrew from a tournament in the United Arab Emirates; the team’s Sunni coach was killed Thursday in a Shiite district of Baghdad.

N. Korea rejects U.N.'s limited sanctions: UN: The U.N. Security Council voted unanimously Saturday to impose limited sanctions on North Korea for its recent missile tests, and demanded that the reclusive communist nation suspend its ballistic missile program. North Korea immediately rejected the resolution and vowed to launch more missiles.

It had to be like this in ancient times. Weapons of mass destruction were not as mass-effective, but still; and I think the longing for peace and for God is – for many – much the same now as it was then; and it is also true that even today there are groups who – even today -- lay claim to God as “Their own.”

And the brutality, well, probably just as bad. Modern times do not always translate into better times. The celebration of life, in our post-modern setting is still too often at the expense of another life. And that brings us right to Jennifer's reading of Mark this morning.

Another celebration, this time a dinner party of King Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great). The gospel starts out in an interesting way, with Herod having a flashback to his murder of John the Baptist, fearing that it is John who has been raised in Jesus and would seek retribution against the king.

We have heard the story of John's death before. John stirring the ire of Herodias, the king's wife, because he called the king's marriage to Herodias illegal (she had divorced Herod's half-brother Philip to be with him). Against Herodias' wishes, Herod kept John about, because of the way he was able to interpret the King's dreams and also because Herod feared harming John, whom he knew to be righteous. However, at this particular celebration, the king becomes trapped. The daughter of Herodias, Salome (King Herd's niece) dances so well that she is promised whatever she wishes by the king– and at her mother's urging she calls for the death of John the Baptist and his head on a platter.

Gruesome as it was, Herod, it seems, was one of those allies of chaos. Imagine, someone's word or promise being greater than another's life. Snap! Off with his head!

Some celebration. And yet, there is a celebration of another sort that follows.

Instead of the raising of forces to go and avenge John's death by the newest threat to the king, that is Jesus, there is no retribution. No attack, kidnapping, bombing, or call for trial of Herod by Jesus. And the greatest of all revolutions is begun with a ministry that calls for non-violence, radical love, and self-less compassion, a message that was to be defined and articulated over a few short years of Jesus's itinerant ministry. Sure, we are all too familiar with those who have claimed Jesus as their own – on their side, so to speak, yet, Jesus aligned himself with none except God (Abba), inviting others to follow. And the greatest cultural, social, and theological movements was begun.

You know, I watched the other night at the Bastille Day Dinner hosted by Parish Life with the help of many, another delightful delicious extension of this church into the lives of its members and this community –

I watched as people celebrated not just that night, that event, but the sense of the culmination of a long year of ministry and mission: from Dorothy's pool in September to Howie's kids in July; from pancake breakfast to strawberry festival; midnight runs to Habitat for the homeless; services through the night and snowstorms, to sunrise at Nick and Cass's; hundreds of "deacons coffee hours" to arranging and organizing our theater event: Two Trains Running; countless committee meetings, choir rehearsals, bookkeeping, anthems, and more; Session meetings; mission study; grounds upkeep; bulletins and publications; still not done – and not a weapon or piece of violence raised;

rather prayers, and love, a sense of longing for God, as we know God in the work, and our examples for others to follow, if they so chose to follow the ministry we felt called to -- called to from somewhere in the mystery of yearning for God, for better, for peace, for an end to suffering – without creating more suffering.

And the ministry to one another that I see and experience dozens of times a month, small indications of the whole – the emails, phone calls, visits, teaching of children, tending of gardens, and so many other ways this congregation has come together for one another time and again, and again. The notes from the Deacon of the month to the people raised up in joys and concern....all so powerful, loving, and life-changing – without a hint of violence.

You know, Jesus didn't tell us to go out and seek world peace. Nope. He said I leave you peace, my peace I give you. It was given at a time where there was as much chaos as now, but he called for a mission to the people where they were, a promise that we would always be taken care of: if God is with us, who can be against us; does not God take care of the sparrows – will not God take care of you; and therein lies your power to help others.

Emmet Fox in his small book on the ten commandments says this about when Moses was given the tablets:

Now, it came to pass that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud and so forth. These [Fox says] were actually dramatic expressions of the change in consciousness as we move away from the common things of life to the higher things.

There are many who will despise thunder at others who see what is right and needed and do it, regardless of how it looks or what might be considered proper. There are those who will be frightened and threatened by the equal sharing of power and resources in service to those who have long been denied or marginalized in the name of greater and more.

Yes, we have global responsibilities to one another, the environment, and the future of this planet. And, we all must do our part there, as well, but I think we also need to dance and celebrate our lives as David did, in advance of and abandonment to God, as we may find God in our lives. It's a chorus line that began long ago in the House of David to Jesus, and to here, in this place, right now.

It's all part of the celebration into life, a celebration that should be an embarrassment to none and depends not on public opinions or world news wires. It is living into the promise of God's great mystery and abundance and promise every day.

Now, there's something to celebrate, along with being here with one another!

Amen.