

Proper 10 Year B 2024

Most of what I know of the Bible, I learned in Zita Vaughn's Sunday school class. Zita had only one child, a son named Hankie, who was bullied most of his young life. He's a dentist now in Dothan. I won't speculate as to what that's about. Back in the day unless you were confirmed, that is to say, unless you were twelve years old, you couldn't receive communion, so we would gather around Mrs. Vaughn in her Sunday school room while our parents were in church, and we would witness the magic, the alchemy, of Mrs. Vaughn and her flannel board. Do any of you remember flannel boards?...They were about this size () set on an easel... and each Bible story was told with the aid of paper figures of Bible characters, and props. The paper figures would stick by means of static electricity, or magic, to the flannel... and the story teller would assemble the figures according to the narrative, creating a series of tableaux as the stories unfolded... But Mrs. Vaughn was the greatest of all flannel board story tellers. She could play it like a harp. It was almost as if the characters were moving, speaking. She could capture our young imaginations and transport us to the foot of Mt. Tabor; she could take us out on a stormy sea with Jonah; cast us into the fiery furnace with Daniel. We exulted when Joseph rose to power in Egypt; we grieved at the tragic death of Samson beguiled by the temptress Delilah; we celebrated Gideon's victory over the Midianites; we marveled at David, a child like us, killing the giant Goliath. We could hear the trumpet of Joshua, and feel the very walls of Jericho come tumbling down as the Israelites entered the Promised Land. We were there at the empty tomb when the

women mistook the risen Jesus for the gardener. We watched Peter get out of the boat in the storm and walk on water, only to sink because of his lack of faith.

I've often marveled at Zita's rare gift. Frances has that same gift in *Godly Play*, the post-modern successor to the flannel board. Perhaps it was that Zita loved the stories she was telling; perhaps she had a sense of the deep truth encrypted in them; or perhaps it was the mere mystery of them that so anointed her hands... her voice her presence. Perhaps it was her own story that so animated her telling. But there was one story that never got told... and that was the story that we just read: The story of the execution of John the Baptist. It is a gruesome story, one not in any way suitable for children... not so suitable for any of us. Mark and Matthew are the only Gospels in which this story appears. Luke and John just don't have the stomach for it.

Walter Bruggemann calls Mark's Gospel, "an epiphany of injustice." The account of John's decapitation is the first such representation. The Gospel begins announcing the Good News of Jesus and the movement that follows him; that the very kingdom of God is imminent. We see it all around us in the healing stories in the first few chapters; the shamed being raised to dignity; in the breaking bread with outcasts... these are all signs of God's kingdom breaking into our world. But here in chapter six, things go horribly wrong. John the Baptizer, Jesus's predecessor in the faith, is brutally murdered by Herod Antipas, Rome's governing vassal of the region. This would have been an unambiguous message to anyone considering joining the resistance. But for the author, Mark, writing some forty

years after John's death, this is a graphic example of what we are up against. This, moreover, is the pervading context of his Gospel that he dares to call Good News. This is a depiction of self-interested power and privilege, the power of empire... coercive, capricious, unfaithful, and deadly. The setting of John's murder is a lavish party in the courts of the elite. It is almost as if John's gory murder was entertainment for the guests. Mark's point apropos of the corrupt and powerful elite is unmistakable.

It's easy to look at this story as one of antiquity, a time far removed from ours; a time and a people yet uncivilized. We don't know for sure if John was in fact beheaded by Herod. We do know from the historian, Josephus, that John was indeed executed. But lest we think Mark exaggerates to make a point, let me remind you that in the founding of our own country, native Americans were murdered by the thousands in the name of manifest destiny; and... during the years between the Civil War and 1955 over eight thousand Black Americans were murdered for petty crimes, or for no reason at all, at the caprice of the powers that be, by having a rope tied around their necks, and hanged from a tree in a public place for all to see. Eight thousand. One such lynching took place just a mere three blocks from here in 1981. And today, just for political expediency, our government is funding the genocide of over thirty thousand Palestinian civilians and counting. Mark calls it worldly power. But make no mistake, by any name, such horror or the potential for such horror is alive and well, just as it ever has been. And we see violence manifest in our culture in more subtle ways... redlining, policing, low wages. And, of course, the final injustice in

Mark's Gospel occurs later on when Jesus, himself, a prophet for the Truth, will be hanged from crossed staves of wood until he dies from suffocation. Power will oppose the truth by any means possible. The problem then, as it is now, is empire. Every social and economic ill that we can name is due to the injustice of power distributed disproportionately. Power corrupts. And corrupted power alone is the seed of injustice.

So what of the Good News? Is Good News even believable in a world such as ours, a world that hasn't changed much, if at all?

Mark's narrative is at its heart a juxtaposition, a paradox, between the violent injustice of our world, and the reality of resurrection present in it. A stark contrast, to be sure. Remember that in the healing stories Jesus tells the one healed to stand up, to stand with dignity and well-being... to resurrect, to rise, in the Greek. Mark sees the kingdom of God, not as a world dramatically changed from what it once was, but he sees the world just as it is, but in the presence of Love. And that is all the difference. Despite the presence of evil, the presence of Love will redeem, restore, and give meaning and purpose to a world that God dares to call good; a broken world that God passionately loves.

In the face of overwhelming evil, good people, trust the sacred stories. The imagination will never let us down. Stories told well and artfully always contain the truth... sometimes a hard truth. Our epic story told by the ancient scribes of our tradition, teaches us that Love is stronger than evil and violence. That life is resilient and renewable and despite the darkness, beautiful; that God is faithful to the process; and that we have good

company on this journey. There are many among us who speak and serve the truth, who are committed to loving their neighbor first. Trust your role in this grand story... each of us are characters who, as Shakespeare put it, “struts and frets our hour upon the stage.” We are characters, protagonists for the good, not made of paper or wood, but of flesh and blood, because Love requires flesh and blood to be real. Love is the life blood of God’s creative life, and we are bearers of that love. In the midst of a coercive, and unfaithful, delusional, and deadly world... we are here to raise up the ones laid low by the evil one, that is to say, the ones shamed and abused by corrupted power and privilege.

There are two important things I think that characterize the life of faith. The first is Praise... because praise grounds us in gratitude, amid a society that has forgotten the healing and perspective that gratitude engenders That’s why we gather as God’s people, to express our gratitude as a community. And the second is presence. Given our catastrophic political situation, many of us have said, half kidding, that we might just leave the country. But not us, not the people of faith. We stand and stay for the truth. I believe our mere presence, whether we say or do anything, might well be the means of transformation. Our lives carry the energy of our sacred stories; and those stories are testimony to the innate goodness of humanity. I want to speculate and say that presence has divine authority. Being present puts us in proximity to the world’s brokenness; and when the time comes to speak or to act, we will know what to do. But for now, presence is the thing. Our presence is our story in the making.

Today's story is sobering.... appalling. It is telling us the hard truth. And we see such callous disregard for the well-being and dignity for the human family among the powers and principalities today. We need to acknowledge what we're up against. But we have our stories, all episodes of the one true story, elegant and brimming with hope and possibility. We know that love is stronger than anything that would oppose the creative imagination of God. Our presence is the presence of Love. Maybe by our mere presence, being proximate to the brokenness of our world, there is healing. Our presence, perhaps, is the one story in the making. Could it be that sharing our stories with others, and receiving their stories... sharing our lives and receiving the lives of others... could it be that healing is in that? Might we recognize that our unique stories are in truth one grand epic... a story of God's Love for the world? Is there anything nobler than a well lived story?? Could it be as simple that the world's hate and indifference is undone by the telling? I'm just asking if our story, the epic story of God's people, set in the midst of a world falling apart... is a story worth believing?