

Arvada
United Methodist Church

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The Squeeze

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Mark 6:14-29

There are some scriptures that simply do not lend themselves easily to becoming a sermon. They are called texts of terror for more than one reason. Today's scripture is one of those texts of terror. The beheading of John.

There are stories in the Bible that will make us shudder and quake, they will make us question humanity and what we are capable of, they will leave us shaking our heads. I have this feeling that we have, as a church, not done any favors to our youth and to many people by not addressing these hard stories in our Sunday school's or in our preaching.

Of course you know some of the texts of terror...they've been preached on so many times they've become familiar their horror doesn't get to us anymore.

A father taking his son to a mountain to sacrifice him. Abraham and Isaac.
Joseph being sold to slave traders by his brothers. (Genesis)
The stoning of the martyr Stephen. (Acts)

But there are others that are not so well known...

You may not have heard the story about the dismemberment of a concubine and how her body parts were sent to the leaders of the tribes of Israel...to try and round up support. (Judges Chap. 19)

You probably haven't heard the story about Judah sleeping with his daughter in law and wanting to burn her when he finds out she is pregnant. (Genesis)

And even though you may know the story of a mother telling her daughter to ask for the head of the prophet John. You probably haven't heard many sermons on that. (Mark)

Texts of terror...they salt the entire Bible from Old Testament to New.

We cannot get away from them even if we wanted to. They are part and parcel of us and vice versa.

It may be that we don't want to hear the Bible's Texts of Terror because we get so many Texts of Terror everyday. A quick look at CNN on Thursday afternoon, when I was writing this, included a story about authorities identifying 7 women out of 11 homicide victims who were found in a field outside of Albuquerque, and the story said one of the women was pregnant. At the same time there was a story about the protestors in Iran being tear gassed and bludgeoned with batons, and yet another about the Titan quarterback Steve McNair, ...the way CNN reported it was...police said McNair, a married father of four children, was killed by his mistress Saturday in what they have classified as a murder-suicide...why did they have to put that piece about father of four children in there?

Day after day of stories like those and we can understand how a person may decide to retreat into something safer and kinder and gentler to lighten the load and the Bible...the Bible because it talks about God and Jesus should be just that source.

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Well...maybe...but maybe not.

Today we run up against one of the texts of terror in our Bible...the beheading of John the Baptist. As one person has put it, "you can put your ear to the ground and listen as hard as you can, but you will not detect a single note of authentic joy or hope anywhere in the vicinity. What you will hear is a sordid tale of anger and revenge, resentment and death." (A Terrible Text, Joanna Adams, The Christian Century June 28, 2003)

There are many things to say about the Bible and about stories in the Bible but one thing is certain, the Bible doesn't hide the full spectrum of those things of which humans are capable.

Would you pray with me?

O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts help us journey this road of faith. Amen.

Do you all know what the squeeze play is? The squeeze play is found in baseball. It is when there is a runner on third who runs for home while the pitcher is delivering the ball to the plate. Sometimes it is called a suicide squeeze. The squeeze is on for everyone, the batter has to bunt the ball because if he doesn't, the catcher will catch the ball and simply tag the runner out, the squeeze is on for the catcher who has to recognize the play, the pitcher and the rest of the infield need to recognize the play for what it is and cover their assigned ground. The runner either has to commit fully to the squeeze or will be caught halfway down the line. The squeeze play is an exciting part of the game of baseball.

The room for mistakes on everyone's part is small...

In the text today, we see another kind of squeeze play. Herod has promised the daughter of his wife Herodias to give her whatever she asks for even if it's up to half of the kingdom. He says it in front of guests and leaders and officers of the government.

Salome, the daughter, hears the offer and excuses herself to go back to talk to her mother and Herodias tells her, "Ask for the head of the baptizer."

Salome goes back in and does her mother's dirty work. The squeeze is on Herod. What is he supposed to do?

He's caught in his own web of relationships. As someone has written, "It is only human to care what others think and to want to please those around us by minimizing conflicts. One need not be Herod to understand what Herod is going through as his birthday festivities take an unexpected turn."

We are faced with our own Herod like dilemmas to negotiate. They may not be life or death situations but we feel the squeeze.

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What do you do with the temper tantrum thrown in aisle 6 by your 6 year old as you hurry to get that evening's ingredients for the meal that you have to cook that night before the PTA meeting starts at 7:00?

What do you do with the mother in her 80's who wants to live in her own house but it isn't safe any longer? What do you say?

What do you do with the teenager who is looking for acceptance from their social clique and begins to experiment with drugs or sex and you know you should have that talk with them but you are afraid...you don't know the words?

And I know you've been there at a board meeting, or an anniversary party, or a birthday party or even over the evening meal and someone says something and it just hangs there in the air...and people stop what they are doing, stop talking...they don't know what's going to happen next. Everything hanging in the balance. You know you've been there.

And the next moment, the next statement...it will make all the difference.

Flannery O'Conner once wrote that there is a moment in every story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected.

A moment of grace in every story. In the story of John's beheading the moment hangs there after the daughter has asked her question. Herod could have said, that is not appropriate, not for this one. But he couldn't, he didn't.

He couldn't let himself look bad.

When we come up against our own moments, our part is whether or not we recognize the moment of grace at all. And once we do recognize it, we'll have the same choice as Herod whether to accept it or reject it.

I wonder which way it will go for us?