

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Ruth Bosch Becker
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
July 12, 2015**

Well, I suppose I can blame it on T.J. who mentioned it last Sunday. I have been singing “Lord of the Dance” (under my breath, for the most part) all week long. You know, ...”I danced for the scribe and the pharisee, and they would not dance and they wouldn’t follow me. I danced for the fishermen, for James and John. They followed me and the dance went on.” And now for the rousing chorus: “I’ll lead you all wherever you may be. I will lead you all in the dance,” said he.

If that were not enough, the back ground music for exercise class at Sherwood Oaks this Monday began with “Stand by me,” Did you know that the words are a “cross over” from “Jesus, stand by me...when the night has come and the land is dark...” to “Darling, stand by me”? (You can Google it if you really want more info.) At any rate, the song is also the title of a movie, a coming of age story about four young boys, searching for a dead body someplace near their home town (Think Stephen King). I recall the song, and more significantly, the comment from one of the boys, now a grown up, who admired his friend Chris, also by now, a grown up. That man, while standing in line at a fast food restaurant, sees two men argue, one pulls a knife and ... Chris, the old friend ...who always made the best peace ... tries to break it up. He is killed. But that line “...who always made the best peace...” is a superb way to be remembered ... could become a personal, hopeful motto, even.

So here we are with Mark, who, after telling stories last week of healing, calling for repentance and sending out ... before all those the feedings and more healings, which we will hear about later this summer, interrupts the Jesus narrative with the story of the beheading of John the Baptist. Luckily for us, the hearers, the action happens off stage ... in good, Greek style. But we have seen enough paintings ... not just by Carrivagio, ... heard enough operas, attended enough movies. Rita Hayworth in 1953, even, to get the picture. And aren’t we blessed to NOT be among the officers, coutiers and leaders who were invited to Herod’s birthday bash. That event went down in history, not as planned, but even more spectacularly and meaningfully.

Maybe it would NOT have happened but for two reasons: Herod mis-judged his wife’s and his stepdaughter’s knaverly and lust for vengeance. It was NOT the expected “brand new car, champagne, caviar” response.

AND Herod swore an oath ... defaulting on an oath could be reckoned tantamount to taking God's name in vain.

And don't you love Mark's understated style? "The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her." So, head on a platter it is. And, as I said, aren't we all blessed to NOT be included in that meal, that banquet, that celebration... out of regard for his oaths and the guests. "Well, you can include me out..."

Time for the 7th inning stretch ... a word about Gospel, not this specific reading, but Gospel in general, We all know it means good news, evangelium. And there is something that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and their contemporaries knew which many of us might not know: the term Gospel, evangelium, had a political and social meaning, and subsequently, a confessional one. So the Christian confession goes against the grain, politically speaking.

Good news to the Greeks and Romans had announced, in the year 9 BC, the good news, evangelium, that Augustus was savior ... soter ... same word used for Jesus by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John ... savior of the world ... and that there was more glory and salvation to come. Powerful stuff...think of Gospel in this sense as a combination campaign speech, inaugural address and state of the union summary: the stuff of which allegiance and is made and demanded. (I am painting with a broad brush.)

To what kind of conqueror, to what kind of ruler, to what kind of commander did the Greeks and Romans owe their fealty? And how do Matthew, Mark, Luke and John make use of that parallelism? And what kind of citizens of Christ's kingdom are we?

Hannah Arendt has said that "Jesus was the one who discovered forgiveness." I remember riding on an English train. Each compartment had a mirror with the name Elizabeth 2 etched on the glass. You could see yourself, sure, but you were always reflected and framed by the name and title of the queen, the ruler. What is reflected when we examine ourselves. Whose are we? Whose citizens?

July 12, 2015, Sunday in ordinary time ... why are we roped in by this story of hatred, power games, jealousy, greed and fear? Right in the middle of a story of Jesus and his love?

It is a head's up. Think of the power, think of the hatred, greed, fear and jealousy that await Jesus in Jerusalem. Think of our Lord and his dance, our dance. And think of how he made and makes "the best peace." And think of HIS banquet in

that modest Upper Room, rented at that. Think of his invitation ... not because we are courtiers, officers and leaders, but because we are his people, people to whom God will speak peace, people chosen before the foundation of the earth, first to set our hope on Christ, to the praise of his glory.

As another well known song goes “Come, let us eat, for now the feast is spread.” An invitation to be Christ’s sister or brother, to sit at the family table.