



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 7 Proper 10 (B)

New Narratives

RCL: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

Fairytales and happy endings play a significant role in shaping us and our expectations about life. We are inundated from birth by themes and images of the way life “should” play out by the storylines provided us in fictional accounts – in books and in film, in everything from Disney movies to Hollywood blockbusters to popular television and online series. We love keeping up with the weddings, vacations, births, and highlights of the lives of celebrities and the famous – not to mention Britain’s royal family. We’re enchanted by tales of the underdog and the anti-heroes who get their happy endings. And somewhere in all of this, we formulate a vision for what our own lives should look like.

But real life rarely resembles fairytales and there is never any guarantee of a happy ending. The Bible isn’t much for fairytales either, and the story in the sixth chapter of Mark’s Gospel is about a royal family that no one envies. King Herod’s second wife, Queen Herodias, is portrayed as a conniving and vengeful woman, filled with hatred and the desire for revenge. She ultimately ropes her young daughter into a murder plot against God’s chosen, John the Baptist. This story reads more like a horror story than a fairytale, as we read about the presentation of John’s head on a platter at her request. We see that King Herod would rather commit murder than appear to be a fool in front of his guests. And John the Baptist’s life itself seems rather tragic; John lived a challenging life, was imprisoned unjustly, and then killed horribly and unexpectedly. And yet, Jesus said of him, “Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.” There are no fairytale endings in the Bible, even for God’s chosen servants.

Still, we humans cling so strongly to images of what we think life should be and look like. We still expect happy, fairytale endings and are often perplexed when our lives hand us something very different. And we are, in fact, so committed to these fairytales and to projecting images of success and happiness, that many of us intentionally project images of our lives to others that are not only highly edited, but sometimes completely false.

There is now a paid service called “Fake a Vacation” in which people can actually send snapshots of themselves to a company that will edit the photos into fake (but fabulous) vacation spots so the client can share the images on social media sites. This may sound extreme, but it’s not too far off from the way our lives are edited on social media and the outside world to fit happy narratives.

In 2013, *The Onion* ran an article satirizing this phenomenon, with the headline “Facebook Version of Marriage Going Great”. With tongue in cheek, they reported on a couple whose Facebook friends react to their happy lives as featured on social media; they claim that the entire vacation was “evidently spent relaxing happily” and was “not once tarnished by short tempers or strained periods of silence.”

We’ve likely all seen these kinds of images and storylines online, and many of us engage in similar behaviors. We know intellectually that what is projected doesn’t tell the whole story, and yet research shows that spending time on social media often causes or increases depression in people because we inevitably compare our lives to what we are seeing portrayed publicly and then end up feeling that our lives fall short.

Life doesn’t have to be less than a fairytale to disappoint us, either. If your life is not going the way you expected or hoped it would or even if it has veered far from the way you’d imagined it, you’re not alone. Perhaps you’ve been sidelined by an injury or illness, a death, a loss, a divorce or broken relationship, or maybe something distressing has happened to your children or someone you love. You may be filled with a sense of disillusionment, anger, grief, heartache, sorrow, or confusion. You may wonder, “Why?” “What went wrong?” You may even despair of life itself.

There are people who can teach us a different way to approach life, however – people whose lives look nothing like a fairytale – people whose lives are not in any way conventional, but who find deep joy and purpose. You probably know someone who has suffered great loss and whose life did not play out as they had hoped, but still, they find joy and a deeper purpose despite it all. Often, these people have found meaning beyond the expected storylines of their culture and are people of faith. John the Baptist is just one example among many from the Bible, along with the many saints and faithful who offer different scripts - alternatives to the lives prescribed by Hollywood, Disney, social media, or even our cultural traditions. This script is God’s script, and it follows God’s purpose and calling on our lives instead.

As people of faith who follow Jesus, this is exactly where our deepest hopes and dreams are to be rooted, in what St. Paul describes in our epistle today as the “glorious grace that [God] freely bestowed on us.” Scripture reminds us that no matter what twists and turns we face in life, no matter what trials or disappointments we suffer, they do not compare to the “inheritance” that God has for us. Paul writes, “having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,” we are “blessed... with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,” and “marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit... the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people.”

When our lives find their meanings and purposes – not in human storylines, but in God’s storyline – the God who called John the Baptist, the prophets, the saints, and each of us to a life of faith, then we can start to see our lives very differently and adjust to new expectations. We can throw away the scripts and storylines someone handed to us or that we embraced long ago and realize that our lives find their deepest

meaning and purpose in something much bigger and greater than ourselves and our individual storylines. And as we root ourselves more deeply in God and God's Word, we begin to see that our lives have the potential to impact others with the love of God in a much deeper way than we ever imagined.

John the Baptist's life was, one could say, rather tragic, and yet, this is not how we usually think of John. We remember that he was a hero of the faith who paved the way for Jesus and helped bring salvation and the Good News of God to countless generations after him and whose witness still inspires us. Like all the saints, we have been blessed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have been called and redeemed by God, and we have been given God's glorious grace to live lives full of meaning and purpose, imbued by none other than our Creator.

Maya Angelou once said, "You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them." Few of us will live fairytale lives. But we have a choice about how we will ultimately define our lives when we follow God's storyline, and the grace, joy, and purpose it brings. Thanks be to God.

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