

## ***EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST***

*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. In books, film and on television, we learn at an early age the way life “should” play out. 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 spellbound by tales of the underdogs who get their happy endings. And somewhere in all of this, we formulate a vision of what our own lives should look like. But, real life rarely resembles the life styles of the rich and famous, 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, who had been married to his brother, is portrayed as a conniving and vengeful woman, filled with hatred and the desire for revenge.

She eventually ropes her young daughter into a murder plot against one of God’s chosen, John the Baptist. This story reads more like a horror story 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. There are no fairytale endings in the Bible, even for God’s chosen servants, such as John the Baptist.

Still, we humans cling strongly to images of what we think life should be like. We still expect happy, fairytale endings, and are

often confused when our lives hand us something very different, to the point that we sometimes project completely false self-images of our success and happiness.

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, simply to impress people.

We’ve likely all seen these kinds of images and storylines online, and many of us engage in similar behaviors. In our minds we know it 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 compare our lives to what we are seeing portrayed publicly, and then end up feeling that our lives are rather drab and boring.

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

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. We 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 to the lives prescribed by 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 rather tragic, and yet, 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, filled by none other than God, our Creator.

Someone 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. However, 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.

**AMEN.**