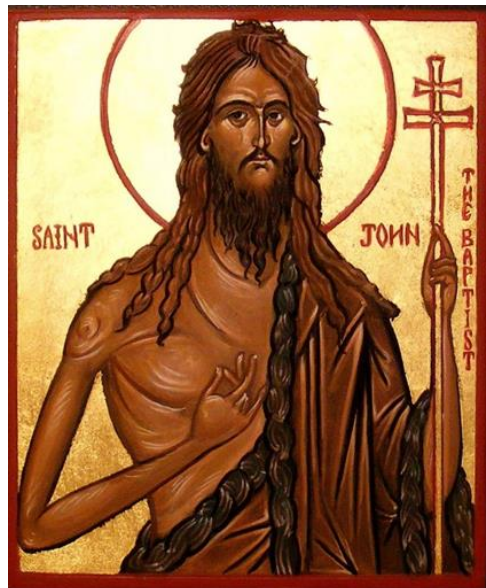


**A Sermon for the 8th Sunday after Pentecost
July 14, 2024**



John the Baptist

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Click Here for today's Readings:
[Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – The Episcopal Church](#)

Amos 7:7-15; Mark 6:14-29

The Plumb Line

Several years ago, on a Friday, I had written my sermon for Sunday and thought I was ready to preach. But that afternoon came the horrendous news of the shootings at Sandy Hook and the deaths of so many children by a deranged shooter. I threw out the first sermon, and started over, using a different text, that of the slaughter of the innocents.

I find myself in a similar position this morning. I thought I had this morning's sermon tucked away and ready, and then, yesterday evening, came the news of another act of gun violence that has shocked our nation. At a political rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, a sniper apparently attempted to assassinate a political candidate, Mr. Donald Trump, and in that attempt killed a member of the audience and wounded two others. The alleged gunman was then also killed. This time, for this sermon, I don't need to change the readings. They are curiously appropriate.

Political violence is at the heart of the story of the death of John the Baptist, a charismatic preacher and prophet. John was killed because he spoke the truth, criticizing the king, King Herod, for bad behavior, essentially adultery, by marrying his brother's wife. Herod threw John in prison but still listened to the holy man, perhaps mulling over the truth of the criticism. Through a complicated set of motives, caused by hate, spite, grudges, and retribution, Herod's wife arranged for the execution of John. You know the story. We heard it this morning from the Gospel of Mark.

We also heard about an encounter with an earlier prophet, Amos, talking with God about assessing bad behavior. Every time this reading comes up, I like to demonstrate the metaphor. So here it is: a plumb line, purchased at Hartville Hardware. If you are building a wall, this is a good gadget to have. It is very low tech, it comes from Biblical times, and it is still in use. The weight on the end of the string is rather heavy, and the string is guaranteed to be straight, if you drop it down to the ground. This tool is useful for establishing a straight line in case you want to build a wall. Drop it right next to the wall, and if your wall is straight, you can tell by comparing

it to the string. However, if your wall is crooked, well, you can tell that too. Amos is standing next to a very crooked wall, and God holds a plumb line next to it, and asks Amos, What do you see? A really crooked wall, which stands for God's people Israel. They have gotten seriously crooked in their behavior.

Sometimes we need to see a comparison like that, to understand how crooked we have become. King Herod got a plumb line correction from John the Baptist. John pointed out that Herod had married his brother's wife, Herodias, which was not lawful. The wife had a grudge against John for pointing out the unlawful marriage. Circumstances gave her an opportunity to have John killed. Let's concentrate for the moment on King Herod.

What was he thinking?

The story is really a flashback. Herod heard about Jesus and thought that John had risen from the dead. Herod knew that he had truly killed John, but it sounds to him as if John is again on the move, in the person of Jesus. He knew that he had done wrong in executing John. Herod could have looked at the crooked wall he had constructed in his rule, and using a moral plumb line, it would have been clear that his actions were wrong, were crooked.

In a way, this shooting incident is also a plumb line. It has shone us in vivid news footage the horror of this moment of gun violence. We don't know the shooter's motive but the results are truly a tragedy, played out in front of the news cameras.

Many people take enormous risks for our political system. Secret Service personnel were on the scene in seconds, throwing their own bodies in the way to protect Mr. Trump. The afflicted audience members had no shield. We have had many such incidents in our history – the assassinations of presidents Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, two Kennedys, Martin Luther King, the attempted assassinations of Teddy Roosevelt in 1912, and of Ronald Regan in 1981. We are a nation where gun violence is an ongoing risk for everyone.

Do we need a plumb line? We got a plumb line yesterday afternoon. We are still in shock at this incident, and we remember all the ones before.

Our Bishop Anne Jolly has written to her clergy:

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July 13, 2024

Dear Ones,

The readings for tomorrow tell the stories of people filled with and acting out of hate, and the horrible destruction to souls and bodies that always follows. Theologian Howard Thurman said that only hatred can “sustain the mood of violence,” which leads “to will the very nonexistence of the other person.”

Today we have seen, again, what happens when hatred for others is lived out in unconscionable violence. Two people are confirmed dead, two people are critically injured, and former President Donald Trump is injured in one of more than 260 mass shootings so far in the U.S. this year.

Beloved, we are all created in the image of God and called by Christ, the Prince of Peace, to walk in love as he first loved us. In response to seemingly never-ending displays of gun violence, our Baptismal Covenant calls us to honor the image of God in everyone. As Christians, we must strive to stop the cycle of hatred and violence by actively seeking and serving Christ in ALL persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. We seek justice and peace for all people in working to end gun violence.

Please join me in prayer for the two beloved children of God killed today, and for those injured, including former President Trump.

Please also join me in actively seeking an end to gun violence. You can find resources from the Rev. Rosalind Hughes, Interim Canon for Mission, [here](#).

Blessings to you as you preach tomorrow, and as you minister to the fearful and broken hearts and souls in need of healing. Take care of yourselves: more time for silence and prayer, more time with beloved friends and family, more therapy and spiritual direction, and more time in nature. You are beloved, and you are not alone. We are all in this together.

God's Peace,

+Anne

The Rt. Rev. Anne B. Jolly
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