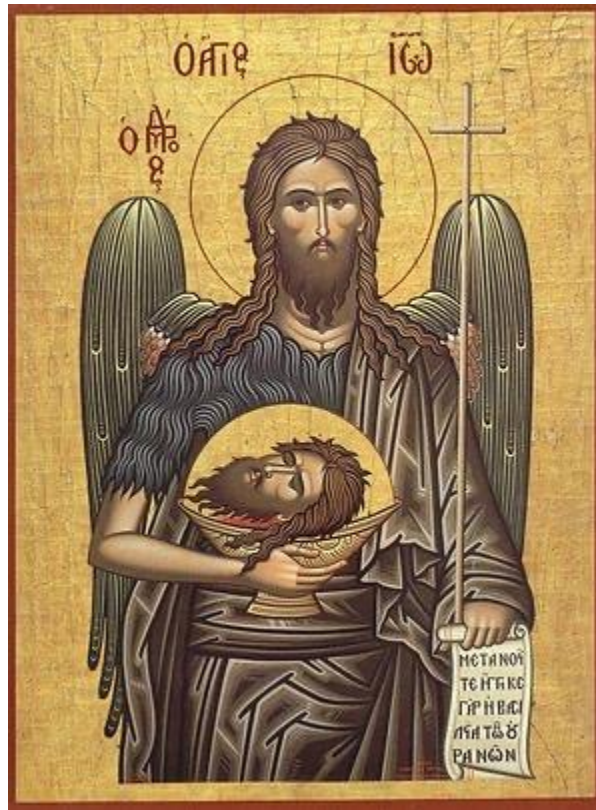


[This was written before the violence of July 13th.]

The *head of John the Baptist on a platter* is not exactly a biblical image that I want to linger with very long.

But it sure has not stopped countless artists from imaging the scene and painting it. The number of paintings of the beheading of John the Baptist seem endless. There is even a feast day in the Orthodox Church on September 11 that is named “The Beheading of St. John the Baptist”. And the icon for that feast day shows John the Baptist in his *glorified body that even includes angel wings*, holding the head of his own *mortal body* on a tray. It is quite a jarring religious image.



There is quite a capacity for human beings to *imagine all kinds of violence*—but not only a capacity for it—but some kind of *predilection, a preference* for imagining violence. No doubt it is tied up in survival instincts but that is not all. |

I was thinking back on my childhood...and some of my favorite cartoons were thoroughly violent, but of course in a cartoonish way: Tom and Jerry...The Road Runner and Wiley Coyote...Bugs Bunny and Yosemite Sam...and I'm sure there were more. And when I got older, among my favorite TV shows were stories where part of the suspense was when the violence was going to break out--shows like The Wild Wild West, The Man from U.N.C.L.E., Have Gun Will Travel, Rawhide, Gunsmoke, Combat!...and then later blockbuster film series like Raiders of the Lost Ark, Star Wars, The Matrix, and on and on. It is sobering for me to realize just how much of my own imagination in my lifetime has been given to stories of violence and how much I have enjoyed them. But I do find it more and more difficult to watch. I have to be increasingly selective and--more than used to be--there needs to be some compelling reason for me to enter an

imaginary world of violence that mirrors our own. Because the reality of human depravity and violence is just too omnipresent—it is just too real...and urgent. So much is at stake—in reality—for everyone.

Because there is so much at stake...is why, I believe, the Bible itself very much reflects the violence of men. Biblical violence is definitely not entertainment...and neither should it ever be some kind of religious justification for more violence. The violence in the Bible is a stark reminder to every generation of a relentless shadow side to reality that works its way through us all. It is especially vivid in the Old Testament. But it is also very much a part of the New Testament—and it is right there in the very beginning: with the Nativity story of Jesus' birth, with the elder Herod's attempts to find and murder the infant Jesus...the conniving of the religious leaders against the adult Jesus...the beheading of John the Baptist...the betrayal by Judas...the brutalization and execution of Jesus himself...the arrests and imprisonments of the Apostle Paul and other apostles...the martyrdoms of Stephen and James...and the great persecutions of Christians by the Roman emperors Nero and Domitian as mirrored in the Book of Revelation. *The Bible tells us such stories in order to tell the truth...and especially to help us realize just how much we need help from God—which is why we use words like Savior and Redeemer all the time in church.* |

But especially these days, Christians cannot afford to give their attention *mostly* to the imaginary *and* real worlds of violence. *We desperately need more than staring at all the endlessly repeating modern equivalents of John the Baptist's head on a platter.*

We desperately need our imaginations to range farther, wider, and deeper. We need another kind of imagination. What shall we call it? A spiritual...religious...mystical...metaphysical...transcendent...sacred imagination?

The Bible does in fact witness to another kind of imagination, even as it mirrors the old imagination of depravity and violence which we must confront. Jesus did this several ways:

- He gathered a group of the most unlikely disciples—just the sheer fact that they were together invited a different imagination about God.
- He welcomed having meals with all kinds of people who definitely did not agree with each other.
- He spent a lot of time attending to people who were broken in body, mind, heart, or spirit--healing and declaring forgiveness to them in the name of God.
- And, apparently, he only rarely gave long sermons or lessons, but preferred to tell curious and tantalizing parables about the Kingdom of God.

The things that Jesus did and the stories he told invited people into a different imagination about God and their life in the world.

And after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus' followers kept gathering...they kept being an unlikely bunch of folks to be together...they kept having meals together until it especially took the form of the Holy Communion...they kept attending to people broken by the world and their own mistakes...and they kept telling the stories that Jesus told, along with the stories *about* Jesus. *Through all this they were forming together another kind of imagination about God and their life in the world. And God's gift of the Holy Spirit kept revealing and teaching their imaginations more and more.* |

We can really see some of the fruit of that in the reading from *Ephesians* today. It is a striking case of the evolving spiritual imagination of the early Christians who began to see God and their world as something much more than all the familiar violences.

If you found the excerpt from *Ephesians* hard to follow when it was being read aloud, then it isn't just because the thinking is complex, but also because that entire section from verse 3 to 14 is actually *one sentence*. Most Bible translations break it up into many sentences to try to separate the ideas somewhat, but actually, they all flow together in one incredibly long, swirling sentence.—full of devotion, passion, and ecstasy.

Can you ever remember a time when you or someone you know was so excited, so elated, so energized about something that they couldn't stop talking?! Like a grandchild with great excitement trying to describe to the grandparents what Christmas was like...or someone really enthused about a trip they had taken... That's what this passage is like—it is effervescent with joy, and gratitude, and hope. Because the early Christians were increasingly discovering a whole new imagination about God and our life in the world that makes possible a different way of living in the midst of the violences of the world. |

So, today, I take the terrible story of the beheading of John the Baptist...as a reminder of something Christians at least used to know: *That it isn't enough to just know what's going on in the world. We need a new imagination...like we can find in the whole of Ephesians and other places...a spiritual imagination...that comes from above...that is far more than anything we can read or witness in the world of human trouble...a spiritual imagination which can be a guiding star in the dark...*

...a spiritual imagination of greater spiritual realities: of the heavenly places...spiritual destiny...the riches of God's grace...the mystery of God's plan in Christ for the fullness of time gathering up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth...that we may know what the hope in God's call is...which exceeds every Rule and Authority and Power and Lordship...even the powers now operating in the sons of disobedience...while we are all called to good works for which God has prepared us...for Christ is himself our peace but not ours only but the peace for the whole world...and we can be members of God's household even now...stewards of God's grace...of the mystery being revealed in Christ...so that we may be rooted and grounded in love...letting all bitterness and animosity and indignation and clamoring and defamation be removed from us, together with every evil, and become helpfully kind to one another, inwardly compassionate, forgiving among ourselves, just as God also graciously has forgiven us in Christ...no longer indulging the foul conduct and imbecile chatter and flippancy of the darkness, but able to withstand the Slanderer's wiles, because we are wrestling not against blood and flesh, but against the Archons, against the Powers, against the Cosmic Rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the celestial places...but instead giving thanks for all things in God...and the mystery of God's plan in Christ for gathering up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth...which is our peace.

(Ephesians, chapters 1-6)

[Usually, the closest I tend to get to this new imagination...is in this sacred worship...where our hearts and minds may be uplifted. And I experience in great Christian writings the communion of saints who can help too. And in those moments when the glory of God flashes through creation itself...the reality of God is made tangible...the heavenly places draw near...and grace is no longer just a word...but a reality.]