

*Note: Text and actual delivery may vary slightly.*

I.

Ouch! The beheading of the John the Baptist is a rather (what can I say?) *auspicious* Gospel reading for my last sermon at Trinity. In the sacristy before the service, I mused, rather uncouthly, that perhaps if we were to give this Sunday a liturgical name, it would be “heads will roll Sunday!” It’s a memorable story. And perhaps it’s a fitting story, because it turns out to be a *farewell* banquet of sorts. Surely, none of us wants to go out as violently as John did. But the story of John reminds us that eventually our time will come to an end for each and everyone of us.

The Eastern Churches refers to John the Baptist as John the Forerunner. John is the forerunner of Jesus. John goes before to prepare the way for Jesus. “He must increase, but I must decrease,” John is quoted as saying.

The image of John as forerunner reminds us that we are all forerunners— forerunners of Jesus, forerunners preparing the way for God and for the advent of God’s reign among us.

Like John, our individual ministries are important. Using our gifts in service to others is a *vital* spiritual practice that enriches ourselves and the community. But our individual ministries have their lifecycles, just like the year has its seasons. Yet, fortunately, in the wisdom of God’s economy, the ministry of the community continues from strength to strength as the whole people of God gives local expression to the life of the risen Jesus—the body and blood of Christ in the world.

One of my exemplars, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, captures well this sentiment of “preparing the way” in one of his oft-quoted prayers. If you’ll indulge me this morning, I’d like to read it in its entirety.

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,  
it is beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction  
of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.  
Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of  
saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.  
No statement says all that could be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No confession brings perfection.  
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
No program accomplishes the church’s mission.  
No set of goals and objectives include everything.

This is what we are about.  
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water the seeds already planted  
knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything,  
and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this.  
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.  
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,  
a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's  
grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference  
between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future not our own.

*Amen.*

Indeed, we're all always preparing the way for what comes next.

## II.

I had an experience of this recently. On Monday, June 29, the day after the Honduran military ousted President Manuel Zelaya, three Trinity parishioners and I (Chris Hardman, Ryan Walker, and Joe Ceniceros) stood on top of a 5,000-gallon water tank above the villages of Santa Rosita and Nueva San Jose de Comayagua. From the water tank perched on top of the ridge, we could see for miles in every direction ... across the beautiful, mountainous Honduran countryside. And we could see the 3.5 kilometers of trench and pipe that the community and the Trinity team had installed coming down around the mountain from the spring to the holding tank, and from the holding tank to the communities.

As we stood on that water tank and the wind blew and clouds sailed across the sky, we knew we were part of something bigger than ourselves. We knew we were preparing the way for something transformative—clean drinking water for every man, woman, and child in the communities; dramatically and rapidly improved health; and an unfolding relationship of mutual learning and growth between our communities. And we felt honored and privileged to be part of this transformation.

## III.

Looking back to our Gospel reading, our friend John the Forerunner put his life on the line for something he believed in. And I think he invites each of us to do the same.

What do you feel called to put your life on the line for? And not just your life in the ultimate sense (sometimes that's easier), but your life in the everyday sense (sometimes that's the harder). What—who—are we preparing the way for?

#### IV.

As I look back, much of our ministry together over these past two and half years has been the work of extending God's table to all people—spiritually and physically. Between the Food Pantry, the Easter and Thanksgiving community dinners, the dinners twice a month at Transition Projects, the Our House dinners, the meals and events at Williams Plaza, and now the monthly SeniorConnect dinners, we've served a lot ... of meals! (Someone do the math!) And we keep working to make space at the table for everyone—faith-based charity *and* faith-based justice.

And I'm confident that with robust leadership teams in place for each of these ministries, these and the other outreach ministries will continue vigorously and will work even greater miracles in the days ahead.

#### V.

When we glance back at today's story of Herod's banquet and we compare it with the stories of Jesus' meals, we see that Herod presided at a rather different table than Jesus. Herod presided at a table of *violence* and *death*. But Jesus presided at a table of *life* and of *inclusive love*—and he gathered together a community of the same. And Jesus calls us to do the same in our own place and time.

And, at Jesus' table, there is something different—the *presence* of something sacred, divine, and powerful. And we, too, can experience that Presence when we continue Jesus' ministry of sharing and breaking bread with the marginalized.

I'm very, very grateful for the ministry we've shared over these past two and a half years of doing just that—of *sharing* and *breaking bread* with those in need, of sitting down and building relationship, and, from that place of relationship, partnering with those in need to build a more just, peaceful, and sustainable community.

To express my gratitude, I'd like to risk sharing with you a poem I wrote. Normally, I wouldn't read a piece of this length. But perhaps today is a day for breaking my own rules. The poem came to me in January/February. It hearkens back to Moses. And it speaks of finding and understanding God's sometimes hidden, sometimes elusive presence in new, unexpected, and even paradoxical ways. Hopefully, it will provide some inspiration for your own journey. It's called "Burning Bush."

I.  
In a field  
in a forest  
there is a presence  
that shimmers and beckons,  
like wind dancing on grass,

and speaks the invitation to draw near.

I set down my load  
and step off *the* path  
and onto no path.

And in the middle  
of the field in the forest  
the great wind blows,  
and the grass shimmers and rustles,  
and I grasp,  
but there is nothing,  
only the memory of a presence in the senses of the heart.

II.  
Take off your shoes,  
for no one has tread here before.

Hasten, but quietly.  
Harken, but stilly.

Close the eyes.  
Close the mouth.  
Open all else.

And behold  
the beholding presence  
that burns but is not consumed.

III.  
I have heard, says the voice.  
Now listen, says the voice.  
I am freedom of freedom,  
and I am more real than real.

IV.  
Where you go,  
I have been.  
Where you've been,  
I will go.  
For I am there,  
but I am not.  
For I go before,  
and I draw you on  
to the beyond that is beyond.

V.  
And on that horizon, says the voice,  
I will meet you there.  
But you will never arrive,  
because you are always arriving.  
And, if you stop arriving,  
and arrive,  
it is finished.

VI.  
Tame me not, says the voice,  
and you will not be tamed.  
Tame me,  
and you will be tamed.

Tame me not,  
and you will live.  
Tame me,  
and history will end,  
numb and void.

VII.  
In a field  
in a forest  
there is a presence  
that shimmers and beckons.

I pray that you will always seek God's presence (even as it seeks you) and that, in God's presence, you will find life.

Thank you, Trinity, and amen.