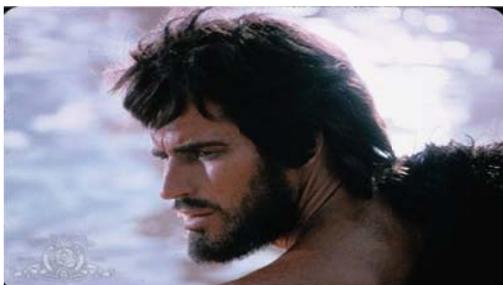


## “When The Church Rises Up”

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2 Samuel 6:12-19 + Mark 6:21-29 = the death of John

**R**emember back in December when I told a story about Charlton Heston playing John the Baptizer in *The Greatest Story Ever Told?* Heston’s agent Herman Citron said, “George Stevens wants you to play John the Baptizer. It’s the lead.”



Heston replied, “Herman, trust me on this: John the Baptizer is not the lead in any picture called *The Greatest Story Ever Told.*” Nevertheless, he took the role. After production began, Heston

approached Stevens to press him to have a spectacular death scene for John. The director replied, “You know, Chuck, the film is really not about John, is it?”<sup>1</sup>

**O**r is it? John in our Gospel today is the lead, if only for a moment.

Jesus had just sent out the Twelve preaching repentance and healing the sick. Between the sending out of the Twelve and their return, we have paradoxically shoehorned in a flashback to the beheading of John. Mark is not being haphazard or sloppy. Mark deliberately placed the story here.



Mark’s point as Tom Long, one of my preaching professors, says:

“When the disciples go out to do the work of the kingdom, when the church rises up to be the church, . . . the world rises up to be the world.”<sup>2</sup>

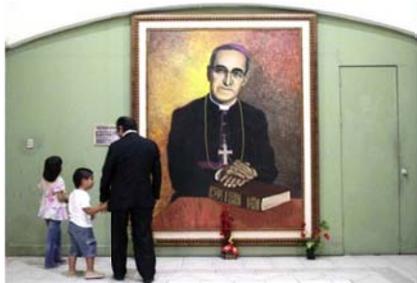
Trust me on this. When we act as we are called to act, when we do what Jesus has asked us to do, the world reacts by pushing back. The pushback in our text today is the execution of John ~ executed not by being convicted of a crime but rather by the vengeful machinations of a narcissistic queen.

**Y**ou might be thinking that was then, but this is now. “When the church rises up to be the church, the world rises up to be the world,” is

even truer today, not just was true in Jesus' day. Listen to these words from a sermon, a sermon very much like the ones that we hear every Sunday:

“In the gospel of Christ ... one must not love oneself so much as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us ... The experience of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for this earth ... May we give ourselves like Christ, not for self, but to give justice and peace to our people,”

Pretty standard stuff ~ just the church going about its business being the church, right? The only thing is, immediately after the preacher said this a shot rang out in the sanctuary and the preacher was dead, Archbishop Romero of El Salvador.<sup>3</sup>



Mark wants us to know: when the church rises up to be the church, the world rises up to be the world. Romero, critical of oppression and leading the El Salvadoran church to be for the poor, the weak and the marginalized, when that happens, the world does what it does best: destroys the truly brave, the truly great, the beautiful, the wise, the compassionate.

**O**ur Hebrew Scripture from II Samuel has a similar theme though a radically different story. I can just hear Charleston Heston saying: “Trust me, Herman, Michal is not the lead here.” It sure looks like David is the lead. Yet for a moment sandwiched between other actions, David's wife, Saul's daughter Michal is the lead. She is the tragic heroine in what could be a classic Shakespearian tragedy.

While David was jumping and gyrating, leading the Ark of the Covenant into the city with a great procession. Michal looked out and saw him. Scripture records that for an undisclosed reason “she despised him.” Later she was punished for this act of defiance. What was there to despise? Was she upset because he danced before the Ark? Hardly. Her point was rather that David was wearing the *ephod*, a garment only permitted for the high priest.



The ephod was a robe yoked at the shoulders coming down to the knees. It had a breastplate to hold the Urim and Thummim, the sacred dice reserved exclusively for the chief priest and used only by the high priest to determine God's will. David the monarch was usurping the role of high priest in wearing of the ephod and sacrificing a fatling calf and ox every six paces ~ only priests should do that. This constituted an unadulterated abuse of power.

David who started out so humble with no sign of hubris, now David had placed himself above God's law. Kings are always trying not just to rule but to go beyond, to mediate between God and subjects. The Emperors of Rome declared themselves gods. Remember the "divine right of kings" from your school textbooks; and Henry VIII taking over the Catholic Church in England so that he could have an Archbishop who would give him what he wanted. And don't forget Civil Religion here in the US.

David sinned grievously that day acting as priest and king. David was not praising God but in fact he offended God in grasping power not his to hold. How often leaders do grab for, lust for power, placing themselves above the law.

**N**ot just David: Herod, drunk with power and a prisoner of his own lust-filled soul, Herod had John beheaded. John was a whistleblower and we know what happens to them. John had dared to call Herod's moral failures into question, had merely said out loud the king has no clothes, had bravely told the truth to power. When the righteous rise up to be the righteous, the world punishes and destroys.



These texts today show, as Jürgen Moltmann noted:

“Participation in the apostolic mission of Christ, therefore, leads inescapably into tribulation, contradiction and suffering ... Just as the Apostle Paul pointed to his persecutions, tribulations, wounds, and scars in order to prove his apostolate, so persecutions and sufferings will also be the proof of the apostolic church.”<sup>4</sup>

We know communities of God's people around the world taking strong stands and how they bring violent reactions from the world. To flip this 180<sup>o</sup>, it is not a coincidence that around the world the places where the church is

most persecuted are often the very places where the church is growing most rapidly and also most active at ministries of compassion and the building of God's realm.

**A**re we the church rising up to be the church? Are we ourselves, each follower of the risen Christ, rising up to be true and faithful? Is our faith courageous enough to sustain us against the world's inevitable backlash?

If we are doing God's work, building the kingdom, we should expect trouble. Yet when the righteous rise up, and the world destroys, God rises up to be God. The world does not have the last word. God does. Attributed to Gandhi:

"First they ignore us, then they laugh at us, then they fight us, then we win."<sup>5</sup>

The ignoble death of Jesus on a cross is not the last word, but rather God has the last word. That word was and is and always will be: "He lives. Jesus is alive." For the church, for each of us individually, for the community and the world, the power of resurrection is always and eternally there.



First they ignore you,  
then they laugh at you,  
then they fight you,  
then you win.

*Mahatma Gandhi*

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We stand at the empty tomb looking in, astounded and speechless. And we have God's final word ringing in our ears: "Jesus is alive. Come and see. Go and tell."

<sup>1</sup> from Charlton Heston's 1995 autobiography *In The Arena*

<sup>2</sup> Tom Long, *Pulpit Resource* 7/16/2000, p. 12

<sup>3</sup> Long, *Op. Cit.* p. 13

<sup>4</sup> Long, *Op. Cit.* p. 13

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/mahatmagan103630.html#IESzhrOhSISci9hE.99>