

## How to Keep Your Head

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St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA

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The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 10B

*2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29*

In 1909, British poet Rudyard Kipling first published *If*, with this evocative first line: “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you....” The poem goes on for four stanzas stating that if you can remain calm, and strong, and quiet, and courageous, and active—if you can do all of those things, then

*Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,  
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!*

You cannot see it as I recite, but “Man” is capitalized. Now, I am inclined to give famous old writers the benefit of the doubt. I won't pick a fight with Rudyard Kipling about gender politics. Let's assume that Kipling was writing to encourage all young people of his day to create a civilized culture—and then the world would belong to them.

And his poem made its way into the popular culture—I bet I am not the only one here today whose parents quoted this poem—or at least that first line—to get their unruly children to pipe down. Nearly fifty years later, humorist Jean Kerr repeated a parody of Kipling, when she wrote, “if you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs, it's just possible you haven't grasped the situation.”

We read three lessons and recite a Psalm every single Sunday to remind ourselves that Holy Scripture contains Good News for us. On this particular Sunday, we are here within hours of deadly violence breaking out in the midst of our national political campaigning. We read Holy Scripture to try to “grasp our situation”—to make sense of the world in light of what we learn and what we pray. And sometimes, it seems like a quaint enterprise. But today we have the images of David's frenzied dance before the Ark of the Covenant and the head of John the Baptist on a platter. And we know all too well that our culture was and is violent and chaotic. So, where is the Good News?

We have been reading in course through the story of David this summer. David was chosen by God—a ruddy-faced teenager, anointed to be the king, even though King Saul was still alive. We read of his courageous killing of the giant Goliath. The lectionary skipped over the sleazy little story of how the King's daughter, Michal, fell for David, and David won her by presenting her father with trophies taken from the bodies of the Philistines—and how only then did King Saul realize that God had chosen David to succeed him and so he began to plot David's death.

But instead, Saul and his sons die. David finally becomes king, as God had ordained all those years ago. And after more than twenty years of battling, the Philistines are defeated. Now David, to

honor God and to exhibit his power, has brought the Ark of the Covenant out of hiding. The presence and power of God ride into Jerusalem.

There is dancing in the streets—trumpets and cymbals and castanets crash a beat, and David himself dances, wearing the linen ephod—a symbol of priesthood. An ephod was a loose garment that covered the shoulders and flowed down to just below the hips. Was David wearing anything else—or was he nearly naked? Commentators disagree about this, but we do know that *as the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart.*

David is not “keeping his head.” There is nothing calm or measured about David’s behavior. And Michal, his wife, knows it. And two weeks from now, we will read about Bathsheba and David’s adolescent behavior toward her and we will know that whoever else Rudyard Kipling was writing about, it wasn’t David.

And yet. God’s favor rests on David—has rested on David for his whole life. David is the author of the Psalm we read today, *The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, \* the world and all who dwell therein.* David is a human being—full of courage, bravado, lust, greed, gentleness, and artistry. David is just as human as any of us, thoroughly motivated by his own needs and desires, and yet utterly aware of the vast presence of God, surrounding him, blessing him, and holding him accountable. God works with David, and with what David offers—and God can take all that David has, the good, the bad, and the ugly, and use it for good purpose. At the end of today’s lesson, the people are sent to their homes with nourishing food. And for a time, at least, God’s reign is established among the people.

Rudyard Kipling might not call David a “Man” with a capital M, but for sure, David reaches out with both hands to grasp whatever situation God puts him in. And throughout his life, David lives the song he sang as a child, *The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, \* the world and all who dwell therein.*

A thousand years after King David, his descendant Jesus lives in a small town in Galilee. In the lesson just before our Gospel for today, he tries to preach and heal in his hometown. And the people are amazed—not at the power of God that everyone else has seen in him, but at his audacity. They know Jesus—they grew up with him—how dare he now presume to tell them about the nearness of God? “And,” Mark tells us, “He could do no deed of power there. . .” (Mark 6:5).

And so Jesus goes on his way, teaching about the nearness of God, reaching into the lives of the people and restoring them to right relationships. They feel as if demons that were possessing them leave them for good. They can return to knowing themselves again—and to knowing their parents and children and friends. And they come to know Jesus, and to understand that when they are in relationship with him, God is present.

**With Jesus, the power of God is in relationship.** When he is with people, and makes a relationship with them, when he knows them for who God created them to be—and when they know him as the presence of God—then great deeds of power are done. Sickness is healed, demons are cast out, abundance is recognized.

And so Jesus sends out his twelve disciples, to spread the Good News. And to underline the importance of relationships, he sends them out in pairs. He sends them out into the middle of humanity—where people are possessed by anger, hunger, and need. Their needs are so consuming that they seem to have no time for relationships at all. Jesus sends his disciples to the people, armed with the power of God, to cast out the demons, and let right relationships flourish.

That is where our Gospel lesson for today picks up. The disciples of Jesus are on the road, taking care of the ones that Jesus loves so much—the least and the lost, the weak and the vulnerable. And the Good News travels fast. And Herod hears it and is afraid.

Herod's fear prompts this memory of the evil way he executed John the Baptist. It is a salacious little story, a messy riot of relationships gone bad: a king who stole his brother's wife and uses her daughter to seduce; an unfaithful woman whose sins make her so blind that she sees a bloody head as a trophy.

Where is the Good News in the story of a man of God who literally lost his head? Remember, that for Jesus, the power of God is in relationship. John's disciples honor him by burial. And John's faithful relationship with God—faithful even to the point of death, becomes part of the story of Jesus. Today, we honor John as the one who grasped the situation, the one who went before Jesus, to prepare the people for a new relationship with God.

In every generation there are teachers and storytellers and poets who want to tell us that everything is up to us—that we humans are the highest order of being. That all we have to do is keep our heads in the midst of chaos and then the earth will be ours. Rudyard Kipling did not invent this notion of the exceptionalism of humanity. But *I* think, if I am able to keep my head when all around me are losing theirs, I haven't grasped the situation.

Making a right relationship with God begins with recognizing that *The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, \* the world and all who dwell therein*. That is our situation.

We celebrate our human situation every time we come to this place, to be in the presence of God and one another. But we are not limited in our celebration. Like the disciples, Jesus sends us out into God's world, to spread the Good News, to care for one another, and perhaps to lose our heads. God is near. We are known and loved. We have Jesus, and we have one another. And the power of God lives in our love.