

# Castles of Sand and Glass

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Matthew J. Moretz, Associate Rector,  
at the eleven o'clock service, July 22, 2012.*

*The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost.*

*Based on Mark 6:30-34,53-56.*

**W**e all sit on a great beach with our divinely-given pail and shovel. And we are all building sand castles, building them with our hopes and routines and our loves. We have our own overarching architectural style. Each of us also has beautiful and delicate details. Some of our castles merge into other castles, sharing a room or maybe even an entire wing. We build these castles together, yet, sadly, some are lost to the impersonal waves of sickness or accident. And so we grieve together. But, if that weren't bad enough, there are some castles that don't fall to the waves. We have our pail and our shovel, but we also have been given feet. And, for a constellation of reasons, some of us choose to use those feet to preempt the waves and kick the castles down.

Late last Thursday night, one of the more popular movies of the year opened in a suburb of Denver. The theatre was packed for a premiere. And in the middle of the first act, a young student of neuroscience walked in through the exit door, donned in black and a gas mask. He then proceeded to shoot into the seats. Many thought it was part of the show, but not for long. People scrambled for safety, but the man killed more than a dozen; more than sixty were seriously hurt. And after letting loose such panic and horror, the man gave himself up to authorities. With the aid of the media, the world was soon sharing in the shock, mourning with the families, and attendant to every detail, looking for answers.

There are 15,000 murders in our country every year. And only a few, like the killings in Aurora, are charged with public symbolism and then reflected on by the entire nation. Our own church denomination has had its share of murder this year. In St. Peter's near Baltimore, a priest and others were killed by a destitute man. The director of an Episcopal school in Jacksonville was shot by a teacher she had recently fired. Each of these incidents was especially brutal for the local and wider community, each having the added painful layer of a sort of ecclesial assassination.

But no matter the sort of murder, every one of them has some of us wrestling with the troubling fact that God has placed us in a world where all of us have been given the power to kick each other's castles down. Our reasons are murky. But, alongside some mixture of heredity and mental illness, some castles fall prey to the spirit that chooses to say this: "If I can't have you on my own terms, no one can." Or, "If the world will not bend to my will, it will die by my will." Or, "If the world forces me off the public stage, I will take that stage by force." And all the security apparatus that we may establish cannot completely protect us from those who take this thinking to its horrible conclusion.

We meet Jesus today at a time when he is reeling from a murder. Our reading for the day immediately follows the murder of his older cousin, John the Baptizer. John had been arrested for criticizing Herod, the governor, and his choice of a wife. The disgraced wife, Herodias: She successfully outmaneuvered her husband to have John murdered. And his body is desecrated with cruel humor, displayed to Herod and all the leaders of Galilee with John's head on a platter, a crushingly public and undignified final chapter for a good man.

What must this have done to Jesus' spirit? Along with deep grief that comes with any loss, the murder of John (the closest thing he had to a peer in ministry) showed him that this is what the world can do. What would stop it from happening to him? Nothing really.

His disciples then return from their two-by-two travelling ministry. Some villages accepted them; some had cast them out. They return frazzled around the time of John's funeral. And so, in the midst of their tired grief, Jesus says, "Come to a deserted place by yourselves and rest awhile." And they do. They all pile into a boat, take it into the middle of the Sea of Galilee, away from the crowds. They rally their spirits, drawing energy from God and from one another. After that rest,

they are able to make their way forward again. They move on, to another shore, to more crowds, renewed to heal the sick, and feed the multitudes. And their faithful path to Jerusalem—the city that kills the prophets—continues.

Our world seems so much more fraught with peril than Jesus'. Maybe it is safer, as a whole; maybe it is more dangerous than ever. I can't tell. But what we perceive in our media is anything but tranquil. Our personal powers have escalated. We live in a world where you don't have to be a governor or king to have your spiritual sickness destroy lives. Now all of us can carry so much destruction in our hand. And some of us will fall to the temptation to wield that destruction.

In our baptisms, which we wouldn't be doing if it weren't for John, in our baptisms we give ourselves an indelible mark that proclaims that we have come to terms with a certain quality of this world that is quite brutal. We are baptized into Christ's death. We publicly proclaim that we are in a world that kills Christ, that kills the things and people of God.

But also in baptism, thankfully, we share in Christ's resurrection. We show forth the reality that the things and people of God do not truly die. As God raised Christ, so will we be raised.

As much as we reaffirm this with every baptism, there are especially trying times when we need each other for solace and renewal. It's in the times of darkness that Christ says to us, as he said to his disciples, "Come to a deserted place by yourselves and rest awhile."

But what can we do when we reel from the slings and arrows of this world? What is really to be done? I think the lynchpin of anything we would do is prayer. Some say prayer is worse than nothing, a distraction from true action. But I say it is the ground of everything that really matters. The Bishop of Colorado, in his statement after the shooting in Aurora, Colorado, had this charge for us: "The greatest gift we have to offer one another is indeed our collective prayer—not merely kind wishes, not simply good intentions, but deep prayer—the ability to hold, tangibly and intentionally, others in that abundant love that flows freely and gracefully within us and among us. This has substance. This has weight and heft. For its the source of deep healing and lasting transformation. Please make this your intentional practice, and please invite others to join you in doing the same today and in the days ahead."

If you heat up sand enough it becomes glass. And, although our time on this earth may seem like a collection of sand castles, there is something wonderful inside them, hidden from view. When we love God and our neighbor, day by day, even in the face of the trials and tribulations of this world, the brittle sand of our lives is fired by the Spirit and becomes as glass. Glass that no wave can move, nor any foot kick down. One day, all the sand will pass away to reveal that our castles are standing on one great castle of crystal beneath the beach where, as Paul wrote, Christ is the cornerstone, the apostles and prophets are the foundations, the saints are the bricks, and inasmuch as we lived for God on this world, the substance of our lives will be the bricks as well. We all can have a share in this great castle, and we can all have our home there, too. As Paul wrote, "In Christ the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God."

And so, today, as Christ did, we regularly gather, setting ourselves apart in a quiet place to rest awhile, to remind ourselves that there is an eternal castle that no wave can topple and no foot can kick down. We can help God to build it up. In it we can find our rest and renewal. And in it, God will find true life in us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

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