

St. PAUL'S CHURCH
Pentecost 9 - Proper 10-B (RCL, track one)

Wellsboro, PA
13-14 July 2024

2 Samuel 6: 1-5, 12b-19
Psalm 24
Ephesians 1: 3-14
Mark 6: 17-29, 14-16

I love a mystery.
Mrs. Murphy calls her local priest, Mother Spice, to come up the street
 where Mrs. Murphy is sure something has gone wrong.
The gentleman who was to drive her to the grocery didn't come.
Murphy was concerned something had happened.
It wasn't like Mr. McDonogal not to show up or to call.
And Murphy didn't want to go alone to check.
So Mother Spice comes, and they go together to McDonogal's small cottage,
 not sure what, if anything, they would find.

Mr. McDonogal, dead, lying at the foot of the stairs.
Tripping on loose carpeting, probably.
Drinking?
No signs.
A stroke, heart-attack? An autopsy would prove either.
No sign of a breaking and entering,
Nothing of a struggle with an intruder.
There was no evidence that Mother Spice nor Mrs. Murphy could see,
 except the face of McDonogal twisted as if in a scream of terror.
What brought that fear?
A ghost?

Mother Spice knew McDonogal only by sight in the village- he didn't come to Chapel.
Murphy knew him to be a quiet man,
 who was always ready to help his elderly neighbor.
But he never spoke about himself, or his history,
 or what brought him to this small village.
Was there something in his background?

Again, Mother Spice was struck by the face frozen by death in a fear-filled scream.
This was not an accident,
 nor a suicide.
A murder?
A pushing down the stairs?
Running away from an intruder?

An investigation turns out a history.
McDonogal was implicated, but never convicted,
 in the murder of his business partner, Sam Weaver.
Years and miles ago, the death was never explained,
 but all suspicions pointed a finger at McDonogal.
This was why he moved himself off the grid in this small village,
 an unassuming cottage down a small street,
 and kept to himself, except for the pleasant neighbor, Widow Murphy,
 whom he could help with minor tasks when asked.
Now that she thought about it over tea with Mother Spice,
 Murphy recognized a quiet darkness brooding over the man at all times.
Never spoke of his background, his family - did he have any? - his professional life.
And he made light excuses as to why he picked this village in which to settle.
And now, him lying dead.

And his partner, Sam Weaver?
No one knew anything about him either.
And now both dead.
The story ended with no resolution.
Cold dead, cold case, cold sealed in the tomb.
Or was it?

Mother Spice pieced the whole thing together.
A good English mystery solver, she traced the history of McDonogal.
After the 'death' of Weaver, McDonogal flew briefly from city to city.
Temporary residences, unsettled and unsettling, as if haunted.
Until the night he fell to his death.
Ghosts of his past haunting and chasing him.
Running from his own truth and tripping over his secrets.
And conscience.
The sense of wrongs done -
 not the ghost of Sam Weaver,
 but the voice of God.
What have you done?
Confess.
Come to the Truth.
God's voice resounds in our souls convicting in beckoning tones
 of grace, forgiveness and compassion.
Like the ghost of St. John the Baptist with which King Herod is haunted.
But this ghost was different than the many others Herod had murdered -
 even his own family members - like his brother Philip, whose wife he took.

Herod had a history of revenge and murder,
 usurpations of the throne of Judea - literally cut-throat politics.
And there were many ghosts wandering the halls of Herod's palaces.
Yet, Herod knew this to be different voice.
Was this John brought back to haunt him, for his past.
Or was this Jesus to confront and offer him a new future?

We, as humans, have an innate sense of right and wrong, of falsehood and truth,
 of good and evil.
But human conflicts, bad business choices and such -
 sinfulness often gets in the way -
 and that's where the doors open for haunting ghosts to come in.

While St. Paul talks about the lion of Satan lying at our door step,
 we know there is the Lamb of God is already inside our dwelling.
It is a loving Savior and redeeming God who calls to us in a most Holy Ghost.
That Spirit speaks to us both of the truth of our lives,
 and yet, the goodness of transformation, and the redemption of salvation.
 facing our past in honest examination and cleansing power in Christ.

My conviction is that if God didn't love us, he wouldn't haunt us.
Why would the Spirits in Dickens' *Christmas Carol* come to Ebenezer
 if there wasn't some seed of redemption offered to a crusted hardened
 and soul haunted by memories of past doings or not-doings.
Here in today's Gospel is not John raised from the dead,
 it is the Savior of Life -
Christ who offers to all - including Herod (who denies him in the end) -
 but Christ who encounters each of us to bring **salvation from ourselves**,
 things done and left undone, as our Prayer of Confession offers up.
Each night, as darkness threatens us with Ghoulies and Ghosties of our past,
 even the pasts of our recent day we can and should pray at our beside:
 "Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. Amen!"
Don't let ghosts from the past haunt you.
Allow the Holy Ghost help you.
"I pray the Lord my soul to keep."
AMEN.