

“Don’t Lose Your Head”

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Based upon Genesis 47:10-26; Colossians 2:6-19

If you grow up in this area, the odds are good that some time in elementary school you will take a class trip or two to the great memorials and museums on the Mall, or to the Kennedy Center, or to the Aquarium in Baltimore, because these are among the greatest educational assets around here. In Westchester County, New York, where I grew up, it was a bit far to go into New York City for comparable wonders. So, throughout elementary school, on our class trips we visited the several historical sites in the county, including John Jay’s Homestead, Van Cortlandt Manor, and perhaps most exciting of all for children of a certain age, Philipsburg Manor, a living history museum created at an old Dutch homestead in Tarrytown, New York. The reason the latter was exciting was not just because you could see the still-functioning grist mill at work, or learn more about how people of the 18th century cooked in the manor house kitchen. Going to Philipsburg was also exciting because it was located in the section of Tarrytown where Washington Irving set his dark and spooky story, *“The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”* Whenever you went to the place, you would hear the haunting tale of how one night, in that very place, the school master, Ichabod Crane, after failing to win the heart of the beautiful Katrina Van Tassel, was chased on horseback by a terrifying, ghostly figure, a headless horseman, who threw his head, (or maybe a pumpkin), at Ichabod as he fled across a bridge. After that, Ichabod Crane was never seen again. The story wasn’t exactly a cautionary tale; none of us had ever actually seen a headless horseman in Sleepy Hollow or anywhere else. But, since professional storytellers, dressed in costume, milked the gothic tale for all it was worth, a visit to Philipsburg could inspire at least a few nightmares, and leave you wondering if maybe there was such a monster lurking nearby, ready to behead another victim in the night.

I haven’t thought about Philipsburg Manor for about 40 years. But reading today’s epistle lesson from *Colossians* this week brought it all back to me because it was the worst nightmare of the author of that text, who writes in Paul’s name but was most likely one of his disciples, that the congregation of Christians in Colossae would soon be headless themselves. Building on Paul’s classic metaphor of the Church as the Body of Christ, with Jesus as its head, the author expressed concern that the Colossian Christians were in danger of being beheaded by “elemental spirits” afoot in their community, or by “the elements of the world,” depending on how you translate the Greek. He was afraid, in other words, that they soon would abandon Jesus’ way, in order to appease the other powers and principalities which haunted their minds and hearts.

We don’t know exactly which powers, principalities, or philosophies most threatened the Colossians’ faithfulness. Studying the philosophical, political, and religious trends of the day, scholars have suggested everything from Gnosticism, Stoicism, Platonism, and Pythagoreanism, to a heretical Hellenized form of Judaism, angel worship, and the worship of the powers of the Earth itself. But whatever it was that had captured the attention of the Colossian Christians, instead of recognizing that they were saved by Jesus Christ and making him their greatest authority, they were giving greater authority over their lives to someone or something which

made demands on them that were contrary to the teachings of Christ. They were, effectively, behaving as those who had lost their head, and were wearing a human-carved pumpkin instead.

Personally, I am grateful that we don't know exactly what pumpkin-head was attempting to rule the body without the wisdom or grace of God in Christ, because the absence of ancient specifics allows us to fill in the blank with the contemporary powers and philosophies which haunt us today. What is it that makes you lose your own head; and what is it which expressly or subtly knocks Jesus' head off the shoulders of the Church, leaving us and it worshiping and following something or someone else?

There are lots of answers to fill in those blanks. The great theologian Paul Tillich, would have quickly identified the greatest threat as "religious nationalism," because as a World War II era German, he had seen how easily patriotism and religion could be confused and conflated to the detriment of human faithfulness to God.¹ As the news demonstrates repeatedly, this still happens today. Almost every day there are people in the news who proudly equate serving Jesus with serving national and political agendas that are contrary to the ways of Christ. But the threat of empire-worship is not one born of modernity. We see in today's Old Testament lesson, written thousands of years ago, how this same threat consumed one of God's best servants without him even realizing it.

Joseph, the most beloved son of Jacob and Rachel, is counted as a spiritual hero by both Judaism and Christianity. We sing about his "technicolor dream coat." We celebrate how he rose from the worst kind of adversity to triumph with God's help. Pastors preach about his gift in interpreting dreams and his example in forgiving the brothers who sold him into slavery. But we don't talk much about what happened after Joseph had his weepy moment of reconciliation with his family. All that most of us know is that Joseph saved the day by saving both his family and the Egyptian people from a famine he anticipated after interpreting a dream Pharaoh had about seven fat cows and seven skinny ones.

I must confess that I had not really thought of Joseph much beyond this understanding until I read a sermon and commentary by Walter Brueggemann on today's chapter.² Brueggemann wondered why it was that we never hear God described as "the God of Joseph."³ We think and hear of God as "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," Joseph's great-grandfather, grandfather, and father respectively. But *Genesis* tells the stories of all four of these our great spiritual ancestors in significant detail. So why don't we say, "the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph"? It turns out, it is not simply because that phrase is too long to roll easily off the tongue. It is also because it is not entirely clear at the end of Joseph's story, who his true God was: Yahweh, the God of his ancestors, or Pharaoh, the god of Egypt.

¹ See Tillich, Paul, Systematic Theology, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 13.

² Brueggemann, Walter, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982).

³ Brueggemann, Walter, "A Fourth Generation Sellout," in Inscribing the Text: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 59-62.

After Joseph becomes Pharaoh's right-hand man, he did protect his Empire from famine. But he did so in such a way that he gave Pharaoh both a monopoly on the food supply, and an economic and political weapon over the people. In three years, he seized all the land, money and livestock of Pharaoh's subjects. When they had nothing left to give in order to purchase a share of the stockpiled food, Joseph then enslaved them. Today's text suggests that they gave themselves voluntarily into slavery; but really what choice did they have? Joseph had confiscated everything they owned and every means they had of providing for themselves; they had no other option but indentured servanthood or slavery. To make matters worse, as Brueggemann puts it, "through this entire process Joseph does not blink, does not express any compassion or signal any regret or any ambivalence about his harsh actions on behalf of the empire. It is all, as Marlon Brando said in his famous role, 'just business.' Nor... does the narrator offer any signal of regret on behalf of Joseph. In the end we don't know if this narrative report is pure admiration for Joseph or if it is quiet irony."⁴

Joseph is the reason the people of Egypt became enslaved. Then, since Pharaoh's successor no longer had need of Joseph, he indirectly became the reason his own people, by ancestry if not allegiance, also became enslaved. Nowhere in today's text do we hear Joseph talking to Pharaoh about how Yahweh will provide, or suggesting a system whereby neighbors help neighbors as the Covenant of Moses would one day require. Joseph gives himself over completely to Pharaoh's nightmare of scarcity instead of teaching God's dream of abundance. He loses his spiritual head and sells out to the Empire.

Now I don't want to dump on Joseph too much. There is much in his story which remains faithful and good. But just as the Bathsheba-incident made it clear that King David was a sinful human being, not a perfect servant of God, the end of Joseph's life makes it clear that he was a complicated hero, not a perfect saint too. It also illustrates how easy it is to lose your head when you get power and praise and security from doing so.

The author of *Colossians* was worried about his audience selling out to the Roman Empire's ways in one way or another, so he takes pains in today's text to note that God in Christ had disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them on the cross. But the Empire isn't the only power which can knock Christ off our shoulders if we aren't careful. The pursuit of material prosperity can, as can the demands of family and work. New age philosophies can, as can political forces, socio-economic conventions, and technological addictions. Today, as we recognize yet another mass shooting in our country, I would add the idolatrous love of guns to the list too. Brian Walsh, a Bible scholar and theologian out of Canada, rewrote today's text using contemporary illustrations to highlight a few more temptations and threats. It's brilliant but long, so here's just a bit of it:

Make sure that no one takes captive your imaginations through a vacuous and deceptive vision of life rooted in the decomposing traditions of late modernity. These traditions

⁴ *Ibid*, 61.

focus on human autonomy manifest in scientific control, technical power and economic growth, rather than on Christ, who is the sole foundation, sustainer and goal of creation.... In him you receive your legitimate place in this world, not through your career, your accomplishments, your grade point average, your “ministry,” or your net worth... All of the things that hold you down and rob you of your life— whether they be the high expectations of an economically oriented society or the weeding-out process of extremely competitive university programs, fear of economic collapse or of an environmental and technological holocaust, debt up to your ears, career failure, feelings of arrogant superiority or a crushingly low sense of self-worth— all of this is nailed to the cross and you are set free...

So don't let the adman tell you what to eat or drink! Don't believe them when they tell you that a new software company is ushering in a new era of rights and liberties. Don't let these disarmed principalities and powers determine for you what “success” is. ... They have been taken captive by this idolatrous worldview and have lost contact with the real Source of life, the true Head of the Church, who is the ultimate Source of our growth and the people of God.”⁵

Notice how the things on his list are all parts of daily life? Notice how most of them are not objectively or obviously evil things? The reason these are threats to our heads is not because they are evil, but because they appear good. Yet to elevate them to ultimate status in our lives undoes the good by making us abandon the ways of Christ. This is what idols do whether they are born of the Empire or our own insecurities. Tillich said “idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy.”⁶ It's that simple. We think of idols as little statues, golden calves or silver figurines. But in the Bible, idols are things first created, and then worshiped by human beings. Anything that a human being creates can become an idol, from a person, to a social construct, to a smart phone. It's all about what you concede power to, as I said last week. Racism develops when reasonable people concede their power to bigots. Empires become oppressive when reasonable people concede their power to political leaders or systems and structures they idolize. In the context of the Church, when Christians make the building their highest priority, or historic theological doctrines and practices more important than God, the Church ends up worshipping idols instead of Christ. Individually, if we allow anything in our lives, even good things, to become our “ultimate concern” instead of God, we do the same.

There is a funny, old children's book written by Claire Huchet Bishop in the 1940s and illustrated with fantastic illustrations by Robert McCloskey, called The Man Who Lost His Head.⁷ In the book, a man wakes up one morning and realizes that somewhere at the fair the day before, he lost his head. He wants to go to the fair to look for it, but is worried about making a

⁵ Walsh, Brian J., “Late/Post Modernity and Idolatry: A Contextual Reading of Colossians 2:8-3:4,” EX AUDITU 15:1 (1999), 5-6.

⁶ Tillich, Paul, Systematic Theology, 13.

⁷ Bishop, Claire Huchet and Robert McCloskey, The Man Who Lost His Head (New York: New York Review of Books, 1942).

scene showing up headless, so first he makes a head out of a pumpkin to fill in the space on his shoulders. But people look at his smiling jack-o-lantern face as an invitation to make conversation, so he runs back home. Next he tries on a parsnip, but people grow concerned about him because he looks so pale and worn out. Trying to find something less conspicuous, he then carves a head out of a block of wood. That false head gets him past the scrutiny of the crowds, but nearly gets him killed at the fair because it doesn't help him to recognize that it is unwise to try to pet tigers. In the end, it is only when a young boy offers to help him look for his head, that he is able to find it again. The boy asks him to describe in minute detail what his true head looks like; and when he does that, and the boy knocks the false head off his shoulders, he wakes up in bed with the right head attached, and a mind and heart grateful for it all having been a nightmare.

It would be nice if the idea of losing your head was only the stuff of nightmares and gothic novels. But Christians do it all the time. If you don't take the time really to know the difference between our head, Jesus Christ, and the pumpkins and parsnips of the world, you could find yourself disconnected from the only one who can truly provide security, wisdom, abundant life and peace. So, make sure that you are rooted and grounded in the Gospel as Jesus told it. Make sure you are taking the time to know God's will and way through prayer and service. Nothing good can come from Christians with false gods and pharaohs on their shoulders claiming they are serving Christ; that condition leads only to slavery and death, not freedom and life. As we have been joined by baptism in Christ's death and resurrection, let us remain joined to him for life, for the good of the body and the world. Amen