

EPISCOPAL

Sermon by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh, St. Luke's Episcopal Cathedral, Portland

(Just after returning from the 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church)

July 15, 2012: Proper 10B: [2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19](#); [Ephesians 1:3-14](#); [Mark 6:14-29](#)

Wow what a story, worthy of an HBO miniseries: Herod is mad at John the Baptist who has accused him of adultery but is afraid to do anything about it. At a party he publicly promises to give his daughter anything she wants. Manipulated by her mother, she surprises everyone by asking for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod doesn't want to do it but is trapped. John the Baptist is killed and the platter is delivered. In trying to figure this out, remember that this is a story about Jesus, not about John the Baptist. The point is that when the very worst happens, God still prevails. Even while John the Baptist was being killed, the one whose way he prepared was already transforming the world. Herod's actions were too little, too late, to stop a movement already in progress. Herod's kingdom and the effects of his wife and daughter's scheming are long gone. The Kingdom Jesus proclaimed continues to grow to this very day, even right here and right now. In our reading from Samuel we see that even though David had his detractors, he danced with joy before the ark of the Lord. David had his challenges, yet he could still celebrate Good News and rejoice in the presence of God.

As you know, I have spent the last two weeks at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, a once every three year gathering of Episcopalians from every diocese – not just from the United States but from around the world. It was an honor to represent you and the Diocese and State of Maine there. As leader of the Maine deputation, I can tell you that the four lay, four clergy, two alternates, diocesan staff and of course diocesan bishop were all leaders whose voices were heard and whose actions made a difference. Thank you for the privilege. Thank you for the gift of time away to help make that happen. The word "Convention" is a bit of a misnomer. It is a legislative session, essentially like trying to do all of the work of congress in ten days using the largest bicameral legislative body in the world. It is a model of empowerment and enlightenment, where lay people and clergy have equal voice, where the people in the pew truly participate in the doctrine discipline and decisions of the church. In order to allow input from every person there, each of the hundreds of resolutions proposed required a public hearing, needed to be perfected or revised in committee, and then approved by both the house of bishops and house of deputies, both of which often revised the material, sent it back to committee, which began the whole thing over again. Especially on my committee – prayer book, liturgy and music – where the resolutions involved entire (and not uncontroversial) worship services, that process was intense. For almost two weeks, our work began at 7:30 am and often went through 11:30 pm. Because committees needed to do work outside of legislative sessions, for several days in a row there was hardly time to eat.

Convention began in a dark mood. Everyone there was aware of a church in decline, fraught with dividing lines over homosexuality, our place in the Anglican Communion, our position on Palestine and other issues, and disagreement over how to reform our structure and create a budget that would help us fulfill God's mission in a new way. For me, as a member of the committee that was working on the service for the blessing of same-sex unions, this was extremely hard. Our committee heard hours of passionate and painful testimony both pro and con and the committee itself had extremely strong conservative and often harsh and accusatory voices that continued almost non-stop. For a while it felt like John the Baptist's head was being served on a platter. It was so bad that one morning after a particularly hard meeting I was so shaken that I had to leave worship. I went for a walk, called Shari and couldn't stop crying. I spent an hour talking to her in tears.

At the same time, however, an incredible dance before God had begun. Daily worship with over 1000 people -- featuring a multitude of languages, prayers from Native American, Caribbean, New Zealand and other cultures, amazing preachers and music from Taizé to steel drums to choirs and organ to trumpets and brass -- drew us all together. The integrity Eucharist was so amazing, so enthusiastic and so moving that people cried there too, only with tears of joy. One of the sermons was from Stephanie Spellers from the crossing in Boston who spoke about St Benedict's rule and the Benedictine process of "stabilitas," "obediencia," and "conversio" - Stability (being grounded in worship and community), "holy listening" to God in (prayer, in scripture and in others) and "conversion" (action, change, or amendment of life resulting from the first two). The second, "obediencia" or "Holy Listening" was both the most difficult and meaningful part about General Convention for me. Most of you know that I like to talk in meetings and am not shy about approaching a microphone. At previous general conventions, I have spent much time testifying for one item or another. Because I was on a legislative committee, this time my task was to listen, not to speak. While the deputation from Maine participated much in the debate, I only had one substantive comment on the floor of the house. Instead, I spent most of the convention time listening -- both to people and to God. Once again I realized that that the diversity of our church means that many people -- in some cases even the majority of people -- don't think like I do! (I know the same is true right here -- and that's OK, in fact, more than OK. As was said often in convention, it is important that "all" means "all.") There was an active and vocal youth presence, a large, well-organized and well-spoken conservative evangelical presence, and an active international presence from Latin and South America, the Caribbean, Europe, Africa and the Pacific. Each spoke. Each shared their story, their perspective, and their position. Each expressed their faith, their struggles, their dreams and their love of God and of the church. Each talked not just about what Jesus would do but what Jesus did, what Jesus meant in their lives, and what it meant to bring and be Jesus to others. To all this, I listened. As I listened both to them and to God in them, I found myself beginning to follow David's example and dance. In doing this, I found myself transformed, participating at the convention at a level I never had before.

That happened in part because beyond worship, beyond communion with God, there was a great celebration of community with one another. From an evening with cathedral deans -- including a dinner with the deans from cathedrals in Iowa, Sacramento, Honolulu, as well as Africa, South America - to a dinner with seminary faculty and alumni, to informal late night sessions with friends from my doctoral program, chats with people from Haiti and people from around the globe, General Convention was for me a great reunion of the family of the church. I saw people literally from everywhere I have lived and served. There was an Arapaho Indian man who Shari and I had worked with when he was a boy on the reservation in Wyoming, a woman from Paris who remembered the day my son was born, the man responsible for my discernment process before I went to seminary, the rector of my former church in Maryland, the former rector of the first church I served, and a man who had been sponsored for ordination from the church where I grew up. I met many many people who had come to Maine and visited the cathedral. I even had a young man approach me who said "Dean Shambaugh?" and told me that he had been part of a group who had spent a weekend retreat at St. Luke's and that my words to them that night were why he was a priest today.

Through Holy Listening, through communion and community, the whole convention began a dance before the Lord. Now, when you dance sometimes you lead, sometimes you go backwards, sometimes you spin or twirl around, and sometimes you step on your partner's feet or bump into others on the floor. All those things happened. In the midst of everything, votes were taken, the legislation was completed, and your church made courageous decisions and took prophetic positions, all the while offering compassion, care, and comprehensiveness for those who disagreed. For some we went too far, for others not far enough. In it all a deep respect for diversity of people and opinion prevailed. This happened because everything was saturated in prayer and grounded in community. This also happened

because from the budget to resolutions to liturgies, everything was focused through mission, specifically the five marks of mission of the Anglican Communion: to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom, to teach, baptize and nurture new believers, to respond to human need by loving service, to seek to transform unjust structures of society, and to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth. With these five marks of mission before us, we followed David's example and danced. This is not just a metaphor. On the last day of the convention, as they played music during a break, we were literally dancing on the floor. When I arrived at convention, I experienced a sense of gloom, of a church split over issues, struggling with declining membership and resources, and fearful of change. What I discovered was a vibrant, mission-focused, wonderfully diverse body of Christ – a church of amazing, gifted people, which like our Lord Jesus is alive and eager to adapt itself for the future God has in mind. Remember that John's story was really the story of Jesus. It looked bad for John the Baptist but the truth was that God was very much at work, the seeds he had planted had born fruit and the one whose way he had prepared and whose kingdom he had proclaimed was very much alive.

What is interesting is that in many ways, St. Luke's and the Diocese of Maine are one step ahead of the national church. Because of struggles with the economy and small churches around the state, we have already begun to be creative and to dance with the Lord. Both St Luke's and the diocese of Maine recognize the need for change are actively seeking God's vision for the future. Grounding ourselves in worship and holy listening, we have already begun the process of adapting ourselves to God's mission and God's future in this place. Once again it seems, the slogan, "as Maine goes, so goes the nation" is true. But what about you? Is yours the story of Benedict or the Baptist? Do you find stability and listening lead to conversion in your life or do you feel like a head is being handed to you on a platter? Is it hard to see the Good News? Remember, that the gospel isn't the story of John but of Jesus. Jesus' story is breaking in all over the place: in this great and amazing Episcopal Church, in this great and amazing this place we call St Luke's, and in the great and amazing people who fill our pews. Have you come here today with a sense of gloom? If that is true, I pray that you will listen – listen to others and listen to God -- and hear the news that the future, God's future is good indeed. Today I invite you to join in the dance before the Lord. Join in the dance that your joy, like mine, may be full.