

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I grew up reading and loving fairy tales, so when the royal wedding occurred between Meghan Markle and Prince Harry several weeks ago, I watched the events of the day unfold with a sense of thrill and anticipation and couldn't help but imagine what it would be like to be living a real-life fairy tale and becoming a member of England's royal family.

I will admit, I've also followed the lives of Duchess Kate and Prince William pretty closely. It was my excitement, I had great excitement on Monday when they released photos of the couple's baptism of their third child at the Chapel Royal. These images looked to me like fairy tales come true. It's easy to get caught up in the idyllic dream that these photos that these lives portray.

Of course, real life rarely resembles a fairy tale. Our reading in Mark's Gospel today about that royal family is sure to remind us of that fact. This royal family features King Herod and his second wife Queen Herodias, who is a conniving and vengeful woman, filled with hatred, who ropes her young daughter into a murder plot against John the Baptist.

This text reads a little bit more like a horror story than a fairy tale, as we read about the presentation of John's head on a platter at her request. Life is not quite so lovely for this royal family. The Bible really isn't one to offer us much fairy tale imagery, because usually when we peel back the curtain a bit, we find that behind the happy and beautiful images that people project, people's lives have a lot more suffering and trials and just plain ugliness than we realize.

Life doesn't have to fall short of being a fairy tale to disappoint us, most of us create a storyline for ourselves. Often when we're young we dream about what life we're going to live. It usually involves particular relationships, and families, careers, and certain successes, but then something happens. Something unexpected and our dreams are dashed.

If your life is not going the way you hoped, or if it has even veered far, far away from the way you imagined it, you're not alone. Perhaps you have been sidelined by an injury, or illness, by a death, an addiction, a loss, a divorce or broken relationship, a betrayal, a career change you didn't want, an accident or a tragedy, turn of event, something that occurred you just didn't see coming. You may be filled with disillusionment and anger, grief, heartache, or just plain confusion.

I know my life hasn't gone the way I would have designed it, and sometimes I can get pretty bent out of shape about that, but then, I'm reminded that most of the people I know really well will say their life isn't playing out so predictably, or following the story line they dreamed about, despite what their lives look like to the rest of the world, or what we see posted on social media.

Research shows us that social media sites like Facebook, or Instagram, you name it, they can actually cause depression: depression for people because people portray the positive side of their lives almost exclusively. We do that in real life too, but it causes viewers to compare their more challenging real lives to these selective digital portrayals. The Onion, a satire news site, did a spoof news story to this effect, and they entitled it Facebook Version of Marriage Going Great.

In it they report and analyze on the lives of a make believe family, a family they called the Wheelers, based solely on their posts and photos on Facebook. It turns out according to the Wheelers' Facebook friends, that all of their vacations and their outings, their lives are always fun and their relationship is never tarnished by sharp tempers or by children fighting.

One friend comments in the news story, "They're so happy and Facebook proves that definitively," so yeah. People's lives aren't usually what they look like from the outside, which reminds us to stop comparing our lives to others, at least for starters.

Then when I start to get really discouraged, God reminds me of many people God's brought into my

life who taught me something about what it really looks like when life doesn't follow the script you wanted or hoped for.

I start thinking about the kids I worked with in juvenile hall in Washington, kids that had been abandoned by their parents at a young age. I think of women in the jails where I was a Chaplain. I recall the mother crying with me as she realized she would not see her girls for Christmas that year. I think of the sick and dying parishioners I've known and visited in the hospital and their loved ones whose hearts broke when they received a tragic diagnosis or when someone died unexpectedly or too young. It is impossible to remain shielded from the many difficult twists and turns that a life may take, along with all the assuming questions about life's purpose and meaning.

I remember one student who made a deep impact on me when I worked at the University of Michigan as an episcopal Chaplain. Her name was Janice, but a few years prior to that, her name was John. Janice was in the process of transitioning from a man into a woman. Janice was deeply hungry for God and for a spiritual community who would accept her, because she described rejection in so many places.

After attending our worship service a few times, Janice asked to meet with me and I was completely ignorant to what a life like hers entailed and I asked a lot of really stupid questions. She was gracious with me and she shared with me her heartache and lifelong torment of what it was for her to be living what she thought was a lie, to never feeling comfortable with her body.

When she was younger, she said she never imagined life turning out the way it was with all of this struggle that she had. Her life was not following the script that her parents had for her, but now she was trying to make peace and find God. What she needed to know from me was whether God loved her and whether she was welcome in our Christian student community. I knew that it took great courage for her to approach me with these questions given all the rejection that she'd faced in our society.

I could only say, "Yes Janice, God loves you completely, and you are welcome here and we want you to be a part of this community." Janice soon became an active member of our group. She started reaching out and ministering to others and that group of episcopal students were wonderful. They embraced Janice like she'd always been a member, and they loved and appreciated her as a fellow child of God. That was a significant part of the ministry of that place, of welcoming strangers and inviting those on the margins of that university into a community of God's love.

While her life hadn't gone the way she'd wanted or she'd planned, Janice knew God loves her, and that her life had come to have a much deeper meaning, far beyond the script written for her, because it was now rooted in God above all else.

As people of God, that's really where our dreams should always rest. Not in the stories we hear and tell ourselves, not in the pre-written scripts or fairy tales with their happy ever afters, but in what St. Paul describes in our epistle today, as the glorious grace that God has freely bestowed on us, because, and here's the key part, God has marked us with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people.

When our lives find their meaning, not in the human storylines that had been created, but in God, the God of love, the God of healing and redemption, the God who walks with us, and carries us through our suffering and trials, who's made us members of that kingdom, of that family, through adoption, and we start to see our lives very differently, we can let go of that script, or that storyline that we cling to, and realize that our lives find their meaning and purpose in something so much bigger and greater than that.

As we root ourselves in God, we see our lives as having the potential to impact so many others with the love of God in Christ on a much deeper plane: we who have been blessed with God's spirit, we who have been called and redeemed by God, as God's people, in that glorious grace, with lives full

of meaning and purpose imbued by none other than our creator.

Maya Angelou once said, "You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them," and few of us will have fairy tale lives. Maybe there's a few, but we have a choice about how we will define and embrace our lives in this world no matter what happens to us. As we remain rooted in God and God's will, we may not go where we thought we would go. We may not do what we thought we would do, but we will end up where we need to be.

Thanks be to God.