

FEARING HOLINESS

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(*Sixth Sunday after Pentecost*)



ST. PAUL'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Lectionary Texts:

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

Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him."

¹⁵But others said, "It is Elijah."

And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."

¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

¹⁷For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. ¹⁸For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

¹⁹And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. ²¹But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²²When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it."

²³And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom."

²⁴She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?"

She replied, "The head of John the baptizer."

²⁵Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

²⁶The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.

²⁹*When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.*

I. Entering a Text of Terror

You know, I have friends who are just at this moment also stepping into the pulpit at their churches to preach. But many of them are in churches that do not choose to follow the Revised Common Lectionary, that three-year table of designated Scripture readings for each Sunday. And so they have chosen their Scripture for today, and I'm betting that today's Gospel passage is not the one that they chose. But here we are.

Why is this in our Lectionary Readings or, for that matter, why is it part of our Scriptures? It's often recognized as one of those so-called "texts of terror" and seems to be tastelessly and somewhat haphazardly nestled among tales of Jesus' healing and teaching and miracle-making. And then this passage appears which isn't even really focusing on Jesus at all. I think I know why most of my friends probably have not chosen to preach from this Scripture. Some would say that I may have drawn the short straw. But, you know, short straws tend to mean that you have to get closer to that which quenches your thirst.

That is the reason that I love the fact that we use the Lectionary. It invites us to broaden our scope of what life holds and our view of where God is and how God moves in and through our lives. No longer can we pick and choose that to which we will listen or plan the way in which God speaks in our lives. Instead, we must open ourselves to God's Holy Presence in every aspect of life.

II. Herod's Easy Way Out

Now you will recall that back in Chapter 1 of The Gospel According to Mark that we read during Advent, we were told that John the Baptizer had been arrested. We then hear no more from or about John until this passage. Now most of this account is told as a flashback, which is actually a sort of rarity for Scripture. Here, the Gospel writer throws the announcement down in front of us: John the Baptist, that odd camel-hair wearing, locust-eating, wilderness-wanderer who preached repen-

tance and change and pointed to the light of Christ was dead, viciously beheaded by the powers that be. And then we hear the account of how and why that came about.

It's an odd story, almost fable-like. Herod Antipas has had John arrested because he had denounced Herod for putting aside his legitimate wife and marrying the wife of his brother. (Whoever told us that soap operas were a modern invention?) And yet, on some level, Herod found John fascinating, maybe even respected what he had to say and yearned to hear more, although he definitely thought it was disturbing and confusing. But he certainly did not wish him dead. But this was not the case with Herod's wife. So, in order to accommodate his wife's wrath, he has John arrested.

And then Herod throws himself a birthday party, a big to-do with lots of good food, good wine, and dancing. And the entertainment for the evening was provided by the young, beautiful, dancing daughter of Herod's new (and John had contended illegitimate) wife. Well Herod was so pleased with her performance that he promises her anything. The world was hers.

So the young girl runs to her mother just outside the room. Here was Herodias' chance. Her nemesis John would meet his demise and she would be rid of him. And so the young girl returns to the party and makes the fateful request for John the Baptist's head on a platter. Herod must have nearly choked. This was not what he wanted! His vengeful wife and this spoiled child had crossed the line. He knows that no matter who John is, he does not deserve death.

But, as the governor, he was in what he construed as a tenuous position at best. After all, he had made a promise and had voiced it in front of numerous witnesses. If he didn't follow through with it, no one would trust him again. So to save face and to secure the balance of power, he complied. After all, he was governor. Some things have to be done for the good of society and for the preservation of the way things are.

Our tendency is to more or less excuse poor, pitiful Herod. After all, he almost couldn't help it, right? He was married to a spiteful wife with a spoiled daughter. And he had to be under a lot of pressure as governor. After all, things were really

not going that well. He had to show people that he was still in control or the whole society would fall apart. We almost feel sorry for him, but, in the end, he still gives the order and takes the easy way out. He still has to take responsibility for what he's done.

III. What Does This Have to Do With Us?

So what does this have to do with us? Why is this passage even included in the Gospel in the first place? What exactly are we supposed to glean from a story that is so violent and so gory and seemingly so totally out of time and place? Commentators have always pointed out the parallels between John's death and Jesus' Crucifixion and thought that perhaps this was the writer's way of foreshadowing what was to come later in the Gospel. But if that was the only reason that this was included, it would be easy for us to remove ourselves from it altogether.

Perhaps we're also meant to look on this as a reminder, a call to witness, if you will, of who we are and who Jesus calls us to be. Because we can say what we want to say about Herod; we can point to his weakness, to his need to appear in control, and to his fear of who John the Baptist really was and what John's words meant in his life. The passage tells us that Herod feared John because he was righteous and holy. In other words, he revered him enough to know that on some level John was right and that John's words meant that Herod would have to change his life.

But this is not just an historical account about Herod. I really do think that somewhere in this passage, we are meant to find and look at ourselves and our own lives. Because we, too, make our own concessions — not to the point, obviously, of ordering someone's death, but in our own way we also bow to convenience and convention. On some level we all live our lives wanting to be victorious and successful, wanting people to like us, and, like Herod, we sometimes miss the opportunity to do the right thing. We close our ears and our minds and we leave, hoping the whole messy thing will just go away. And we miss the opportunity to be who God is calling us to be.

Maybe that is the reason that this horrible story is here in the first place; otherwise, we'd all be tempted to start thinking that this Christian walk involves following some sort of miracle working-healing-rock star-Superman character. Well, sign us all up for that! But it's not about that. Jesus kept telling everyone not to say anything about all those miracles because following Christ does not mean going where the miracles are; it means becoming Christ-like. It means becoming holy.

Think about it. The disciples are riding high on the power of Jesus' teaching and miracles. And Jesus sends them out. In last week's Gospel passage, Jesus actually told them to expect rejection. But just in case we missed that part, it is made much more explicit today...This is not easy. But easy is not what we were promised.

This story of John the Baptist calls us to have the courage to be truth-tellers, to tell the truth that is God to everyone around us and to stand up for what is right, to speak out against injustices, and to boldly and with all our might dance to the music that God is playing for us. We have a tendency, though, to play it safe, keep our mouths shut, and work hard to avoid offending anyone or doing anything that might disturb the peace of our carefully-choreographed lives and our cautiously thought-out religion. And, yes, speaking out may sometimes be uncomfortable; it may not win us any popularity contests; it may even mean that we are in many ways rejected from what we think is a normal way of being. If we take the Gospel seriously, it means that we may no longer relax in our comfortable cheap seats and look for God to show up on cue but rather that we will have the courage to become holiness.

IV. Entering Holiness

Holiness is sort of a complex thing. We crave it, we pursue it, and we try our best to attain it. But most of us have to be honest with ourselves. We want it at our beckoning and on our terms. We are afraid to let go of the lives that we've created for ourselves so that we may have the life that God has created for us. We are afraid to allow the old to pass away so that God can reveal the newness that God is doing. We are a lot more like Herod than any of us care to admit. We opt for convenience

and convention and complacency and in a way spend our lives fearing the mystery of holiness, fearing what entering holiness and the unknown would mean for our lives.

What does it mean to enter holiness? In theological terms, we talk about holiness as being “set apart.” But the actual root word means wholeness. Entering holiness is nothing more and nothing less than becoming whole. It refers to the essence of God’s being, the sum of all attributes that is God. And so, for us, entering holiness is the process of integrating the loose threads of our lives into a whole tapestry of beauty and divine grace. It is giving up who we think we are to become who God created us to be. It is becoming whole within ourselves and within God.

You know, recently I heard someone refer to the Christian life as linear – as a sequence of steps as we move from creation, through growth and the pursuit of Christian perfection so that we might finally reach that place where we are one with God. I don’t think that’s right. I don’t think of Christian perfection, or heaven, or whatever you imagine it to be as something to which we somehow graduate. It’s actually here and now. If we just open our eyes, we will see glimpses of the sacred and holy everywhere.

Think how many times in the Scriptures someone is told “do not be afraid.” We love that. It provides for us a wonderful assurance that everything will be all right. But what if rather than merely being a promise that we won’t get hurt, those words are actually an invitation to come forward into the mystery of God? “Do not be afraid, my child, do not fear holiness. It is yours for the taking.”

There is a story from the Sufi mystical tradition of a disciple who comes to an elder for direction.

“Where shall I find God?” the disciple asked the elder.

“God is with you,” the Holy One replied.

“But if that is true,” the disciple asked, “why can I not see this Presence?”

“Because you are like the fish who, when in the ocean, never notices the water.”

It is not that God is not with us; it is that we are unaware of that incredible Presence.¹

When we finally stop doing what we think we should be doing or trying to please those who we think we should be pleasing and listen for that which God is calling us to be we will become aware of that holiness of which we are already a part.

V. Do Not Be Afraid

There is no doubt that our Gospel passage today is still a bizarre thing to include in our Lectionary or even in our Scriptures. But maybe it's a call to us to redefine what we think "normal" is. Maybe it's a way of realizing that becoming holiness does not mean our comfortable business as usual. Bishop William Willimon says that "*It's a fearful thing to commend our spirits to God because well, who knows what God will do with our lives?*" That is the crux – submitting one's life to God means that one gives up control, gives up the "plan" that one has laid out for his or her life. Submitting one's life to God means that one's life as he or she knows it ends. And that is indeed a scary thing.

But, really, what are we afraid of? Are we like Herod that we're worried that we won't measure up to those around us? Are we struggling to maintain some image of ourselves that we've created? Are we afraid of what people might think? What would actually happen if we, like David, actually danced with all our might, actually threw ourselves completely into holiness, actually drank up all that God offers us into our lives? What if we began to look at our lives in terms of significance, rather than success? What if our complacency became compassion? And what if our lifelong pursuit of hunting for who we are became our bold step into holiness, into wholeness within God as God recreates all things new?

So, hypothetically, what would have happened if Herod had done what he should have done? This passage is as much about missed opportunities as it is about anything else. The most obvious thing, of course, is that perhaps John the Baptist would not have been murdered in such a heinous way. And maybe the beautiful young girl who was used to getting her way would have learned the difference between right and wrong. And maybe the people who were witnesses to the whole sordid act would have respected Herod even more for standing up for what he be-

lieved and for acting in a way that was true to himself and his authority. And, of course, there is Herod. Maybe Herod would have been different. Maybe he would have courageously found himself but, more than that, maybe he would have found that holiness that he so feared and in it he would have been freed to be who he was called to be in the first place.

Maybe we did get the short straw today. But maybe, just maybe, we have come a little bit closer to that for which we thirst. Maybe we have realized that standing up and stepping out and boldly dancing with all our might is what we are called to do and who we are called to be. Angela Monet said that “*those who dance are thought to be quite insane by those who cannot hear the music.*” Do not be afraid. The part of the sacred and the holy that is yours is waiting. All you have to do is step up and enter it and begin to move with its rhythm.

In the Name of the One who is holy and who invites us to enter the holiness that is meant for us.

(Endnotes)

¹ Joan Chittister,

There Is a Season

(Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 14.