

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost July 14, 2024

Amos 7:7-15; Mark 6:14-29

I have loved the Gospel of Mark for the 31 years I've been pursuing this calling of public ministry. Yet, I've never seen this story of King Herod as anything more than a literary device. A story meant to take up time between Jesus sending out his disciples to proclaim the coming of God's reign and their return to tell Jesus everything they have done.

I've never seen it as anything more than a foreshadowing of Jesus' own death. They do get "confused" at the beginning of the text and an unjust death at the hands of the religious/secular authorities, disciples claiming the body and putting it in a tomb, sound awfully familiar.

But what we have here might actually be an extension of what came before. A clear example of the difference between the reign of the world and the reign of God. An example of both the power of the Word Jesus proclaims and the inexplicable reasons for its failure to grow in some people.

John the Baptist gets in trouble with Herod for proclaiming the truth, that it is not lawful for him to marry his half-brother Philip's wife- Herodias. At her urging, Herod locks John up, but refuses to have him killed. Why?

He fears John, knowing that he is a righteous and holy man. Herod likes to listen to what John proclaims even as it leaves him at a loss, perplexed. Even as that proclamation challenges Herod and his authority. Challenges the reign and thinking of the World.

Now, to get the full impact of that, you have to know something about Herod. The son of Herod the Great, he was known as Antipas. Herod and his family were known for their political ruthlessness, including the killing of family members to protect their power. They struggle and scheme to remain in Rome's good graces so that they might rule their little slice of the Empire. They will do anything to protect that. There are not nice people.

Yet, there is something in John's proclamation that connects with Herod. One commentator suggests that this is a real life illustration of Jesus' parable of the seeds. Herod is an example of the seed that falls among the thorns. It receives the word and it begins to grow, but the cares of the world, the lure of wealth, the desire for other things chokes it out and it yields nothing.

Herod receives the word, keeps coming back to it. But then in an unguarded moment is caught by the ruthlessness of his wife. He does not want to behead John, but because he doesn't want to lose face with his leaders, because it is in his political and social self-interest, he willingly sacrifices John to his own ambitions. He

has John beheaded. The cares of the world and desire for other things chokes out the seed of the word that is sown in Herod.

This is real. We can think of places that happens today, can't we? I hope they aren't moments where people literally die, but I'm sure we could all name a moment where we have compromised what we knew was right, was the way to follow Jesus, for what was politically or socially expedient for us personally. Aided us in the reign and thinking of the world.

It is also an example of the clash of these two reigns that we talked about last week. The reign of the world says that you do whatever you must to maintain or gain political power. Up to and including murder. The reign of the world is Herod sending out employees to arrest those who speak truth to it and to murder those who get in their way, just like it did to John.

In the reign of God, Jesus sends his followers out to heal and enlighten people so that they might be saved. So that they might find life that truly is life. So that they might be freed from all that binds them. Find community and the shalom of God that is more than just lack of conflict but the deep and imperturbable waters of baptism.

In the reign of the world, we have Herod and his leaders sitting at a sumptuous banquet with more than enough food. While in the reign of God, Jesus sends his disciples into the world with no

bread, no bag, no money in their belts. So that they must rely on the generosity of their neighbors for shelter and food.

Herod has everything. The disciples have nothing. Or do they?

In chapter 8 of Mark, Jesus warns his disciples that those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for his sake and the sake of the good news will save it. Herod has everything, but he loses the only life that truly is life. The disciples will lose their lives- look at the ultimate fate not only of John the Baptist but the others, but they find a life that truly is life, a life worth living, in following Jesus.

This story is about reality.

The reality that even religious authorities and religious people can be caught up in the thinking of this world. This is true of Herod and the Temple authorities, but it was also true of the northern Kingdom of Israel from our Hebrew Bible reading. They had a Temple, they had priests and sacrificed according to God's command. But God sent the prophet Amos to tell them that they had lost their way. That what they were building was not the reign of God but had gone crooked. Because it ignored the plight of the poor, the marginalized, the weak.

And they would not hear. In a confession and forgiveness rite from the old green hymnal I grew up with we phrased it, "We deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." That is the worst

sin. When we convince ourselves that what we are doing really is what God would want us to do. Even in the face of clear evidence to the contrary.

Time and again, Jesus doesn't teach those around him so much as he corrects their misunderstandings. The folks Jesus went to studied God's Word regularly, all their lives. They knew the Word of God intimately, certainly far better than we do. And yet, so often they misunderstand. They engage in the thinking of the world, not the thinking of the reign of God. Even if they cloak it in pious displays.

What kind of worldly cares chokes out the seed of the Word in your life? Where in your life are you like Herod, sacrificing the thing you know you should do, for "success" in the thinking of this world?

I don't know about you, but I can name too many of those moments in my life. But friends, there is good news for us. Because God in Jesus never, ever, ever gives up on us. But continues to proclaim that good news to us- through faithful followers, through the Scriptures read/sung/proclaimed, through prayerful conversation with God.

So that we hear again the good news, "The reign of God has come near in Jesus. So near you can feel its breath on your cheek. Repent! Change your thinking! And believe in the good

news! Trust in the thinking of that reign. Live as citizens of that reign.”

And the good news is that you have already been transformed. Through the waters of baptism that wash us clean each day. Reboot our lives from the ground up. Through the power of the Holy Spirit that comes to us through the Word. Through the love, grace, and mercy of Jesus.

Friends, you have already been transformed. It’s just that sometimes we forget. Sometimes we get confused. Especially when we spend too much time around the stinkin’ thinkin’ of the world.

Following Jesus, is not just admiring from afar, knowing about Jesus, knowing the Bible as simple stories, even historical stories.

Following Jesus is about knowing the Bible as our story. Just as true and formative as your biological family history. It is about being in relationship with God in Jesus. Getting up and following him, joining him in the freeing proclamation that in him the reign of God is made visible. Join him in living as if that is true.

And we join together with Paul and all the faithful in singing praise to God for this wonderful gift. That we don’t have to live in the way of the world any longer. We have been freed from all of that.

May the Word of God root deeply in your hearts. May the peace of Christ which surpasses all understanding cover you. So that you might be emboldened to respond to the call of Jesus to follow him and join in proclaiming that freeing and life-giving good news to others. That the reign of God has come near!