

Pentecost 8B (7/15/2018)

Amos 7:7-15

Psalm 85:8-13

Ephesians 1:3-14

**Mark 6:14-29**

*Prophets pay a price for speaking truth to power. Abusive power is willing to sacrifice the vulnerable to preserve itself, both in the ancient world and in ours. But the prophet's message echoes from beyond the grave, crying out that abusive power will ultimately submit to the Lord of life.*

Lutherans are gospel people, and the challenge to Lutheran preachers is to point to the good news in any given biblical text. God is offering a word of hope, and it's our job to bring it to light. Every once in a while, however, we land on a text that is so devoid of hope that there's apparently no good news to be found in it. Today's Gospel from Mark is a good example. The story of John's death at the hands of Herod Antipas is an especially hideous illustration of abusive power at work. The salacious details have captured the imagination of artists and writers over the centuries.<sup>1</sup> Political intrigue, family drama, sensuality, a wanton and grisly execution, rumors of a popular hero resurrected to take vengeance on a wicked king – it sounds like the plot of Game of Thrones. And, if only we could leave this story in the realm of the imagination, we might be able to stomach it. But the Gospel writer of Mark includes it, not simply to indulge in fantasy, but to tell the story of Jesus, the story of the good news of God's reign come near. Why?

Before I try to answer that question, a brief word about prophets. We usually think of prophets as fortune-tellers. But in the case of biblical prophecy, that's too narrow a definition. It's true that we often read predictions of future events in the words of the Hebrew prophets, predictions of Jesus' advent as Messiah, for

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<sup>1</sup> See Douglas John Hall, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 236.

instance.<sup>2</sup> But the biblical prophet is one who speaks for God in a broader sense. To quote a renowned scholar, “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, **the prophet casts God’s vision for the world as it might be over against the way of the world as it is. It may be a vision of the future, but it has vital implications for the present.** And, since the prophet criticizes the way of the world as it is, he’s often met with opposition from those who benefit from the status quo, that is, those in power.

This, of course, is the story of John the Baptizer in King Herod’s court. John has called all of Israel to repent and be baptized for the sake of forgiveness, preparing them for the one who is to come after him.<sup>4</sup> This call to repentance extends even, and especially, to the king. His marriage to his brother’s wife provides the impetus for John’s critique, but Herod might well be denounced for any number of abuses. The son of Herod the Great, his family legacy is oppression and bloodshed, a legacy that he upholds. It’s worth noting that Herod is not a flat character; he’s not a personification of evil. According to Mark, the king perceives that John is “a righteous and holy man,” and styles himself John’s protector. He is perplexed by the prophet’s words, but also enjoys listening to him. So, the king is conflicted when his daughter, at her mother’s prompting, asks for John’s head on a platter. Here is a chance to choose righteousness, to exercise power in accordance with the justice and mercy of God. But Herod cares more about upholding his image

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. Isaiah 7:14.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 1:4-8.

in the eyes of his peers than he does about the life of an innocent man.<sup>5</sup> So, he chooses what is politically expedient over what is right. And John pays the price.

In the end, God's justice and mercy never stood a chance. Does this sound familiar? **How often are we left shaking our heads at gross abuses of power like this one? To what extent are tyrants willing to go to preserve their supremacy?**

Janani Luwum, a faithful and gifted clergyman, ascended through the ranks of Anglican church leadership in Uganda in the 1960s and 70s, and in 1974 was elected archbishop of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Boga-Zaire. Luwum's rise coincided with the rise of Idi Amin, Uganda's notorious dictator, who came to power via military coup in 1971. Amin's reign was characterized by treachery and brutality, and his security forces carried out multiple atrocities against ethnically specific populations. Interestingly, during his time in power, the dictator cultivated a relationship with the archbishop, ostensibly to curry favor with the church. But, could Amin have been genuinely curious about Luwum? Could he have been receptive to the clergyman's commitment to the way of Jesus? In the end, we can only speculate because the way of the world prevailed. In 1977, Archbishop Luwum presented Amin with a note of protest against the violence of his regime, and Amin responded with the charge of treason. The official record states that Luwum later died in a car accident while in custody, but it's generally accepted that Amin ordered his execution.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Karen Marie Yust, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 238-40.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/janani-luwum/>. See also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janani\\_Luwum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janani_Luwum).

The story of Janani Luwum and Idi Amin is a tragic parallel to that of John and Herod. The Gospel's ancient tale of scheming and violence reflects the character of abusive power in every generation. **Herod exemplifies every leader throughout the ages who has leveraged his power with corruption and cruelty, and John exemplifies every prophet who has dared to call them to task.**

So, where's the good news? Why does the evangelist include this story at the heart of his Gospel? I believe that **Mark's purpose is to tell us the truth about ourselves, to lay bare the machinations of worldly power and to contrast it with the power of healing and new life at work in Jesus.** Of course, the tragic end of John's prophetic ministry prefigures that of Jesus himself, as the Roman Empire pegs him as a threat and makes an example of him on the cross.

But, the good news is not to be found in the suffering of the vulnerable at the hands of the powerful. No, the good news is that **the prophet cannot be silenced, not really. His message echoes from beyond the grave, crying out with conviction that abusive power will ultimately submit to the Lord of life:**

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away?<sup>7</sup>

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 10:1-3.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 6:20-21.