

Message for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (7/11/2021)
Mark 6:14-29

Lutherans are gospel people, and the challenge to Lutheran preachers is to point to the good news in any given scripture. Week by week, God offers us a word of hope, and it's the preacher's job to bring it to light. But, every once in a while, we land on a text that is so seemingly devoid of hope that there's no good news to be found in it. Our Gospel from Mark today is a case in point.

The story of John the Baptizer's death at the hands of Herod Antipas is an especially hideous illustration of abusive power at work. 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 an HBO fantasy series. And, if only we could leave this story in the realm of the imagination, we might be able to stomach it. But, Mark includes it, not to gratify readers with an appetite for scandal, but to help 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, let me say 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 Hebrew prophets, predictions of Jesus' advent as Messiah, for instance.¹ But, the biblical prophet is one who speaks for God more generally. To quote the renowned scholar Walter Brueggemann, "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the

¹ E.g. Isaiah 7:14.

consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”² In other words, **the prophet casts God’s vision for the world as it should 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 critiques the way of the world as it is, they’re often met with opposition from those who benefit from the status quo, that is, those in power.

That’s the case with John the Baptizer in King Herod’s court. John has called all of Israel to change their hearts and lives in order to prepare for the one who is to come after him.³ And, this call to repentance extends even, and especially, to the king. Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife provides the impetus for John’s censure, but the king might well be denounced for any number of abuses. As the son of Herod the Great, his family legacy is oppression and bloodshed, a legacy that he’s more than willing to uphold. It’s worth noting that Herod is not a flat character; he’s not simply a personification of evil. According to Mark, Herod perceives that John is “a righteous and holy man,” and styles himself as John’s protector. He’s 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 justly and mercifully. But, Herod cares more about maintaining his reputation than he does about the life of an innocent man.⁴ So, he chooses what is politically expedient over what is right. And, John pays the price.

² *The Prophetic Imagination*, 3.

³ Mark 1:4-8.

⁴ Karen Marie Yust, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 238-40.

When all is said and done, God's justice and mercy never stood a chance. Does that sound familiar? **How often have we witnessed gross abuses of power similar to this one? How often have we seen tyrants go to extreme lengths to preserve their power?**

Janani Luwum, a faithful and gifted pastor, 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 Uganda's notorious dictator, Idi Amin, 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 certain ethnic groups. All the while, the dictator cultivated a relationship with Archbishop Luwum, ostensibly to curry favor with the church. But, could Idi Amin have been genuinely curious about the archbishop and his message? Could he have been receptive to the way of Jesus?

We'll never know because, in the end, the way of the world prevailed. In 1977, Luwum presented Amin with a note of protest against the violence of his regime, and Amin responded by charging him with treason. The official record states that the archbishop died in a car accident while he was in custody, but it's generally accepted that Amin ordered his execution.⁵

The story of Janani Luwum and Idi Amin is a modern parallel of our Gospel story today. Indeed, **Herod Antipas exemplifies every leader through the ages**

⁵ www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/janani-luwum/. See also en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janani_Luwum.

who's leveraged his power with corruption and cruelty, and John the Baptizer exemplifies every prophet who's dared to call them to task.

So, where's the good news? Why does the evangelist include this account in his story about Jesus? I believe that **Mark's purpose is to tell us the truth about ourselves, to lay bare the machinations of abusive power and contrast it with the power of healing and new life at work in the world through the reign of God.** Of course, John's violent end prefigures that of Jesus himself, as the powers peg him as a threat, too, and make an example of him on the cross.

But, the good news is that **the prophets can never be silenced, not really. Their voices echo through eternity, crying out in every age that abusive power will finally 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?⁶

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.⁷

⁶ Isaiah 10:1-3.

⁷ Luke 6:20-21.