

God's Larger Picture

King of Glory Lutheran Church

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Living in the tension of when we cannot find any Good News in our lives. Where is the Gospel in this text? When we cannot see any hope in the future – we can continue to trust in the hope of God who is bigger than what is happening right in front of us.

Mark 6:14-29

¹⁴King Herod heard of [the disciples' preaching,] 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. ²⁹When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Will you pray with me? God, come and open our minds to hear and our hearts to know your presence this morning. Amen.

All week long, I have been struggling with this text. Where is the Good News? Where is the Gospel? It hardly seems appropriate to even declare, “The Gospel of our Lord” after we hear about John’s beheading in prison. Of course, I understand the multiple reasons why Mark includes this text. It is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ upcoming death at the hands of a sympathizing political figure. It demonstrates again how Jesus’ life and mission are connected to the socio-economic political affairs of the day. Also just as John’s life and purpose is to point people to Jesus, so too is John’s death connected to Jesus’ mission. Thus we need to hear the tragic end of this God’s servant.

Yet John’s beheading is a serious event in God’s mission thus far. He had disciples. People were listening to John’s prophecies of a new kingdom dawning. But now he is dead. No longer can God work through John. Herod – due to the promise to his daughter – gave the order for the death of this holy man whom he Herod, had protected and even was in awe of. There is no Good News here.

And what about Herodias, Herod’s wife? She had a grudge against John for telling Herod that their union – she and Herod’s - wasn’t appropriate. In a nasty triangulation, Herodias, turns Herod’s hand by telling their daughter to ask for John’s head in front of all the guests, knowing Herod could never back down. Now there’s a healthy marriage to emulate! No Good News there either.

Herod himself? Is he only a king on a chess board of other people’s decisions and manipulations as is evidenced by fulfilling the promise to his daughter? No. He wanted Jews to recognize him as the true King. To gain their support, he was in the midst of completely rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. Then John and Jesus’ ministry were beginning to upstage his political ambitions. So Herod is the one who has John arrested and at the end of the day, he is the one to order the beheading.

So where is the Good News, the Gospel for us today? What kernel of hope or joy can we carry from a story so filled with drama and dead ends?

Have we ever been at a juncture of all dead ends? Of course we have. It is the place where everywhere we look, there is no life. No hope. No leads on encouragement let alone second options. Whether it lasted only a few hours, a few days or months, we’ve all experienced a time when, like in this story, there is no Good News.

Everyone in the family is fighting. The pain of infertility. The loss of employment. Our children's lives are in upheaval. After a bad car crash there is no extra income for another vehicle. A Dr says to you, "I'm sorry, there is nothing else I can do."

Or on a broader level, we see a collapsed building in Surfside where there used to be life and families. The eyes of hungry children cannot escape us from TV advertisements. Politicians make – in our opinion – poor decisions in dealing with world issues and we pause to wonder about the negative consequences that will arise next.

How do we live in that place of tension of life's really tough experiences and trusting that God is good and will provide? That even though a John the Baptist dies, the inbreaking of God's Kingdom is truly at hand? That even though we cannot hope, we can still see evidence of God's life-giving movement around us.

Even John, even John the Baptist, while he sits in prison, sent his own disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the One, or are we to wait for another?"

Think about that, John is Jesus' cousin. God revealed years ago to John's parents the purpose of his birth and how he would herald the Messiah's arrival. Now as John sits on the cold floor of that prison, even he, questions what God is doing.

"Are you the Anointed Messiah or are you not? Here I am sitting in prison when I thought we were to take on the government together! Is all this for naught? Who are you Jesus?"

Obviously I'm guessing at John's thoughts, but John's question illustrates at the very least a sense of confusion about if Jesus will truly be bringing Good News to God's people. "Are you the One or are we to wait for another?"

When we come to those points like John, when there are no explanations for what is happening in the world and in our lives, and yet we believe God must still be at work bringing new life then how do we live?

There just might be a tiny bit of Good News in this story after all. Listen again to how Mark describes Herod's curiosity with John the Baptist.

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.

Yet he liked to listen to him. Herod gladly listened to John talk or preach. Even though Herod was confused, perplexed by what John was saying, Herod enjoyed listening. Perhaps God was working on Herod. Just maybe, God's spirit was pulling on Herod's heart, though he might never have known.

We Lutherans often live in tension. Our theology is one of holding tensions. Law/Gospel. Life/Death. Saint/Sinner. Herod lived in tension as well. He certainly didn't want to be upstaged by John and Jesus, yet Herod gladly listened to John. God might have been at work in Herod.

Perhaps in this tiny nugget we too remember that God's goodness might not be revealed in the moment but will ultimately be revealed. John's death is part of a larger picture. Furthermore, his death doesn't negate what Jesus will accomplish on the cross.

Something greater than what we can see is always happening around us. Even if we are confused or stuck, God's work is always larger than what you and I are experiencing right here and now. When we despair there is no Good News from God at all, we've forgotten we are only one part of a much larger story and God might be working in us, preparing us for the next right step. In the midst of our confusion, only keep a tiny kernel of wonder and even hope that God will show up right around the next corner.

Families stood at the bottom of the collapse in Surfside, saying, "We just are clinging to our prayers and God." That statement might not have brought their loved one back, but it did turn them to a reality that God was still holding their loved ones. In that families could grieve and then move forward.

It is part of what we call the great reversal. God upends all we see and know and uses it for God's purposes and God's good. In Herod, is a politician who wants to be seen as the King of the Jews. In prison is the man whose life work it is to point to the King of the Jews.

Yes, John's death was a blow to Jesus' mission. Yet he was only one part of the larger story. There were disciples both John's and Jesus'. Soon there were more followers. John died, but it didn't stop Jesus' life and work. Right after John's

death, Jesus feeds five thousand. Then He walks on the water. God is so much larger than any one person's life. Even John the Baptist.

In the moments of our despair when the whole world are only variations on the color gray, may we remember that while we may not see or experience God's grace, and goodness and mercy towards us, it might just be happening beyond our sight. Amen.