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Mark 6:14-29

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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." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

For 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. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for 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. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When 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." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." Immediately 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." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

The gospel of the Lord. Praise be to you O Christ!

Proclaiming the gospel courageously

Sisters and brothers, siblings in Christ,

The texts assigned for this Sunday all show us how God reaches out to the lowly and lifts them up to be proclaimers of God's message to others and partakers with God in God's reign of peace and grace. In Amos 7:7-15, the prophet Amos who does not see himself worthy of being called a prophet, is called by God from behind his flock precisely for the purpose of delivering God's word to the people of Israel. In Ephesians 1:3-14, we hear about the ways in which we have been made children of God, having been marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, the unmistakable seal that binds us eternally unto Christ our Lord and our Redeemer. As a result, we are made to be witnesses of the grace of God which has been bestowed upon us. The gospel text of Mark 6:14-29 illustrates the power of the proclamation of the gospel as well as the unfortunate and expected perils that come with proclaiming its prophetic message.

To be honest with you, when we read today's gospel it is very hard at the end to say "The Gospel of the Lord," and harder to answer, "Thanks be to God!" It is hard not because it is not the gospel, but because of the tragic and un-gospel way in which the passage ends. Yet, it is the best way to end and frame this pericope. Ended differently would massage and sanitize the depth of the sin of the human heart and rid us of the opportunity to hear the urgency of the call of both John the Baptist, and especially, the urgency and the nature of the ministry of Jesus. It is, sisters and brothers, siblings, into that sin-filled, corrupt world that Jesus breaks in.

It is in the depth of our sin and sinfulness that Jesus relentlessly and urgently comes. It is even as we "make our bed in *sheol*" that God comes to save us (Psalm 139). The atrocity we witness in the beheading of John the Baptist in the gospel of Mark, as atrocious as it may be, points unfortunately and tragically to the fate what awaits Jesus. John the Baptist is precursor to Jesus in ministry from beginning to end, from birth to death. And yet, for our sake, Jesus enters the world of the atrocity that silences and beheads John. That is the looming gospel hovering over the entire passage! We can now joyfully say, even as we lament and grieve, "The Gospel of the Lord... Thanks be to God!"

The atrocity depicted in the gospel text which happens in retaliation to John the Baptist's faithful proclamation, serves as a reminder that the task of proclaiming the gospel can lead to and has often led to tragic ends. The story of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador where our faithful missionary the Rev. Brian Rude has faithfully served for decades, often risking his own life, is a reminder of the dangers of being prophetic in our proclamation of the gospel, and of the perils of speaking truth to power.

John the Baptist is a humble prophet who sees himself as a precursor to Jesus, the one he has come ahead of to prepare the way. John the Baptist goes as far as to see himself unworthy to stoop down and untie the thongs of Jesus' sandals. His humility and his reverence and adoration of Jesus is contrasted with his defiance of Herod who has acted

consistently against the interests of the people and of the vulnerable. Using the power of his position, Herod has been ruthless, merciless, and cruel.

As proclaimers of the gospel in the 21st century, we often keep quiet, cave, and retreat in front of leaders abusing their power. We often remain silent in the face of the vulnerable being marginalized, abused, and their rights and dignity trampled upon. How long did it take for us the church to acknowledge the plight of Indigenous people? And how many of us till today are not even able or willing to acknowledge their plight at the hands of both the government at all levels, and, sadly and hopefully repentantly, at the hands of the church?

How many of us have turned and looked the other way and passed by the vulnerable and the marginalized like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37? How many of us have sought to preserve our comfort to the detriment of the poor and the suffering? How often have we striven to preserve our lives instead of responding to the challenging needs of the neighbour? Comfortable churches make comfortable members who long to remain comfortable.

Perhaps the greatest gift the church can give us is to make us uncomfortable since it is in our discomfort that we are able to meet the marginalized, the downtrodden, the rejected, the vilified, the poor, and all who live in discomfort.

The corrupt nature of power which has rendered the church as powerful as political rulers, has made the church in many instances and over the centuries, oblivious to the suffering and the pain of others. The church in many cases has not walked with the poor, but rather, like Herodias, enjoyed and thrived in the company of the powerful, abandoning the poor and the marginalized in their misery. Instead of joining John the Baptist, Archbishop Romero, Bonhoeffer, and missionaries such as the Rev. Brian Rude in their journey with the marginalized and their proclamation of God's justice and peace for all, we have either walked past injustices and remained silent, or contributed sometimes unknowingly and unintentionally to the deepening of the injustices and the pain of the marginalized and the poor.

In light of this self-examination, we the people of God hear today's gospel with a sense of deep and abiding guilt. How can we be at times like Herodias? Or how can we be like Herodias' daughter who is also referred to in the NRSV as Herodias, and who participates cluelessly and contributes in significant ways to the unjust and cruel scheme unfolding? How can we be like Herod's peers and the ruling class who have stood by and done nothing? How can we be like other proclaimers who were contemporaries of John the Baptist, including his disciples who are nowhere to be seen or even heard? Sounds familiar?

The guilt of such abandonment of the call to proclaim the gospel in challenging times and circumstances and of speaking truth to power is too great to bear and can rather have a paralyzing effect on us. Yet, the gospel which sets us free is abundantly clear in this gospel passage. Yes, the scripture passage depicts the atrocities committed against John the Baptist, but the point of the gospel is the faithful proclamation of the gospel in the absence

of which cruelty, chaos and confusion reign. Saint Mark in his gospel portrays John the Baptist as the ultimate precursor whose tragic death as a result of his proclamation, points to the one coming after him who will also face a tragic death, but this time for the redemption of the world.

If on the one hand John's proclamation of repentance for the forgiveness of sins is upsetting and met with retaliation and death, Jesus' proclamation of God's unending grace will be met with greater resistance, retaliation and also death. Yet, it is in Christ's death that John's proclamation is ultimately fulfilled. John the Baptist's proclamation is fully achieved in Jesus' death and resurrection. The scene that Mark depicts brilliantly, show us the body of John being passed on pseudo-eucharistically from one person to another, from the guard to Herod to his daughter and to her mother, sealing the guilt of the participants in the sin of the murder and ending of John the Baptist's life. It is the supper of death! This antagonistically, points to the holy supper in the upper chamber where Jesus institutes the Holy Supper, and passes on the plate and the cup to his disciples who pass them on to one another as they commune in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The transformative power of Jesus' death and resurrection wipes away our guilt and shame and sets us free to proclaim the gospel. Let's proclaim it freely and courageously! Let's not be held back by the comfort we enjoy! Let's strip ourselves of our privilege and walk with the poor and the marginalized! Let's speak truth to power! Lovingly! Herod's brother, Philip, who could not speak against the injustices he faced from the king, found a voice in John the Baptist's proclamation. Many of the marginalized among us, as we walk with them, we lend our voices to theirs, and together, we proclaim the gospel that sets all free. May the voiceless find their voice in our faithful and courageous proclamation!

May Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless the word in our hearts and in our minds.

Amen!