

Rev. Lynne Ogren                      Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT  
July 14, 2018                      8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year B                      Mark 6:14-29 [30]

*Add verse 30 to the gospel reading:* <sup>30</sup>The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

It is easy to be so engaged in this gruesome story of Herod and John the Baptist that we miss the setting in which Mark places it. In this passage Herod is remembering his relationship with John that ended so badly. It is the new preacher, Jesus, who has caught Herod's attention and causes him to remember John. And now there are disciples of Jesus who have been sent out to preach and heal and cast out demons—just like Jesus, and much like John.

Herod thinks maybe this Jesus is John reincarnated—or the ancient prophet Elijah or some other great prophet, all of whom made life difficult for the people in power in their day.

John's role was to prepare the way of the Lord. Back in chapter 1 of Mark's gospel Jesus began his ministry after John was arrested. And this is where our story flashes back, with John in prison and Herod's memory of how he came to have John killed.

John prepared the way of the Lord by "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin."<sup>i</sup> That's why Herod had him arrested. John told Herod to repent of his adulterous relationship with his brother's wife, Herodias. From that relationship came the daughter who danced for Herod and was given a gift that led to John's beheading.

But Mark bookends this memory with the work of the disciples, who are delivering on the promise and proclamation of John.

In the name of Jesus, God's love and compassion for the world is being preached.

In the name of Jesus, people are healed through forgiveness and grace.

In the name of Jesus, the demons that overpower us and lie to us and con us into thinking we are not worthy of love and life are cast out by the truth that new life is the gift of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

In the name of Jesus, grace, hope, and love are being planted like seeds in a world where false power is expressed with violence and manipulation and deceit. That is the world Herod lives in, and as intriguing as John was to him, this Jesus character and his many followers are even more threatening to him.

How can the message of grace, hope, and love be threatening? It is our human nature to seek power and achieve greatness. Grace, hope, and love level the playing field. We are each in need of grace. Everyone hopes for a better future. We all long to love and be loved—whether we are rich or poor, young or old, powerful or powerless.

There are days when we as Christians are faithful followers of Jesus. We care for the people around us. We speak the hope we know in Jesus to those who are hurting or grieving. We stand up to injustices when we see Christ in the face of those in need.

And then there are days when our fear of others and our self-righteousness take over and we use whatever power we might have to put others down or hold them back. We don't think we need to repent. We don't want to forgive. Our grief or anger or jealousies are used as weapons that persecute.

Following Jesus means that this sinful part of ourselves—the parts that are turned in on ourselves—must be put to death in order for us to be the prophets Jesus calls us to be.

This summer my niece is beginning her journey through the United States Air Force Academy. How many of you are survivors of military boot camp? Then you know what it's like for a bright, eager young person to be stripped of everything that makes them unique in order to be built up into the person that branch of the military wants them to be.

Regan told her parents that she is so grateful to be able to go to chapel services twice a week, on Fridays and Sundays. It's the one place she gets to smile! At the Air Force Academy this summer teenage kids are dying to themselves and being raised as future officers.

This is a kind of death and resurrection by the law. Like the Old Testament reading today, a plumb line is set and these cadets are either in line with the law of the academy or they aren't. And when they are not there are serious consequences.

God still sets a plumb line for us. There are still consequences when our lives are off kilter from the ways of God.

But by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has given us a new way to learn and grow as God's holy and faithful people. The writer of Ephesians reminds us today that we have been marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit through our baptism. We can't be kicked out of God's family. We can't be left behind. God will not abandon us because Jesus set into motion God's "plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

This is the good news Jesus and his followers were bringing into the world in our gospel reading. There is new life when we repent and put our trust and hope in God's future for us. There will still be consequences when we turn back in on ourselves, trusting in our own power over God's power, placing our hope in our own desires rather than God's desires for all people and all creation.

But whatever those consequences are, God is present in them to reset our plumb line, setting us in right relationship with God and with those around us. This is the gift of Holy Baptism—that no matter what, we belong to God and in Christ we are made new and righteous.

With that kind of confidence, we can boldly proclaim the love of God to the world, even in the face of the powers of this world that would want that message silenced. By following Jesus, we offer ourselves up to be stripped of who we once were, Luther called that the Old Adam or the Old Eve. As we learn and grow as children of God we shed our power-hungry, self-centered lives and are clothed with the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

This is a life-long process of change. Martin Luther put it this way:

“This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road.”

We are growing as faithful followers of Jesus with the confidence that in Holy Baptism we have been claimed as God’s own children with all the rights and privileges that come with that relationship, including forgiveness when we find ourselves out of plumb with God’s plan and purpose for us.

This is the promise that grounds our faith. This is what gives us confidence to go out into the world with good courage to face the powers that try to overpower us and those most vulnerable. We go as ambassadors and prophets both proclaiming and living out the love of God we know in Jesus Christ. God bless us in Christ with every spiritual blessing as we go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Thanks be to God! Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Mark 1:4