

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Amos 7:7-15

Psalm 85:8-13

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-29

07/15/2018

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

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.

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

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

Good News?

Good morning! Did you enjoy that reading of the "good news"? That's what the word Gospel means. The Greek word εὐαγγέλιον literally means good news. The word was originally a sort of political proclamation from the leaders of a region or country, but was adopted by Christian writers to represent the Good News of Jesus Christ. But what's the good news in

today's story? That's the question I was asking myself two weeks ago before I left on vacation... And I was struggling with finding an answer.

So... I did what any normal person does while on vacation and I called together a council of church leaders. After dinner on last Tuesday evening down in Murrelles Inlet in South Carolina I stood on the docks with my 9 year old nephew Brody and 7 year old niece Ella and discussed with them the Gospel reading. "Where's the Good News?" I asked these young scholars. They were silent for a time and finally decided that they couldn't find good news in the story of John's beheading. My search continued...

The next wise sage I sought out was my brother; he's spent his life in the church and has led small groups and other activities. "What's the good news, Rick?" I asked, as we sat on the hotel balcony, me enjoying a cigar and my brother there with his pipe. Like Gandalf the Wizard he sat and pondered... "Why does there have to be Good News?" he asked. It was a good question, but his next remark hit the nail on the proverbial head: "Well, how do we define 'good' news? Does it have to be happy? Can it be sad?"

Somehow, this lesson is good news... the challenge is breaking through our superficial understanding of what "good" means. We usually think of good as beneficial to ourselves, or something similar. A quick search of merriam-webster.com will show you a variety of results for the definition of "good."¹ From favorable character or tendency to be attractive, the word "good" has many options. But I think for us we should stick with something like a suitable fit, or right.

Another way to look at it is from the perspective of our different players in this little drama. We have before us the only flash-back in all of Mark's Gospel. We're looking back at

¹<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/good>

actions that have already taken place, remember that the next time you think of the Bible as simple, we have some cool stuff going on! From the perspective of Herodias, it's good news, she finally gets rid of an annoying thorn in her side. From the perspective of the executioner, it's good news, they get to continue doing their job, secure in the knowledge that they'll continue to have work. It's also good news for those in power. It serves as another example of what happens when you speak out against the strength of those in charge, of what can happen when you rail against the powers that be.

But it doesn't seem like good news for Herod. He's torn between his promise to the daughter and his supposed interest in John the Baptist. Herod found his words captivating, interesting, but the man had gone too far. You see, Herod had broken some levitical rules. You can't marry your brother's wife, and so John spoke out against the union, knocking him down a few rungs in the perceived trust of a nation that was built on the behavior and rules that separated the Jews from everybody else. If Herod was willing to discard the Jewish traditions and faith in this instance, what else might he change? No, Herod was caught between his belief that John should live and the temptation of those in power to make sure they stay in power.

The other person we don't know about is the daughter. Traditionally, she's been identified as Salome, and the story has been depicted time and time again in art. But the text makes no specific mention of this daughter's name, only that she danced. In artwork she is usually depicted as a seductress, wooing the man Herod into giving her what she wants, but some scholars have pointed out that this girl could have been as young as 12 years old, and the verb used to describe Herod's reaction "*simply means 'please' or 'accommodate' and does not suggest sexual*

*overtone*s.”² We don’t know if this was what she even wanted, while it’s entirely possible, we don’t know for sure. Was she pressured by her mother into asking for something she didn’t want? She wouldn’t be the first 12 year old to have been forced into something by a parent... No, this might not have been good news for her either...

Our final main player in the story is John the Baptist himself, who speaks not a single word. It’s definitely not “good” news in the classical sense of the word for him. He’s been thrown into prison for speaking out against the leader, having received who knows what kind of treatment, only to be suddenly visited by some guards and the executioner, relieving him of his head with little to no fanfare. The whole episode is rich with action, jumping from one thing to another until John’s head is served up on a platter, the text makes no mention of it being silver.

Now here’s the most interesting part of the story. While we know John the Baptist was killed by Herod, the other scholarly work from the time seems to suggest that our Gospel reading today is wrong when it comes to the facts. John the Baptist was most likely killed in a completely different location for a completely different reason... Which begs the question that I think harkens back to our original wrestling... why include the story? What’s the point?

Well, I think it does a few things. The first is that it shows us what can happen when you question those in power. Herod was at least interested in what John had to say, on the surface he seemed like he might be an OK guy for leadership, but it was just a front. Christians often make the mistake of putting our trust in political leaders like they’ll be some kind of messiah... they won’t, it never works. The story we have today helped the original audience and us realize that

²Donahue, John R., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Mark*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002. pp. 199

being a Christian isn't a promise to have all the good in life. One commentator writes that "*Mark also reminds his readers that prophetic figures like John... can expect suffering and even death at the hands of those rulers who 'lord it over' others and put their honor and reputation above truth and righteousness. This story is a sobering reminder to (the) church.*"³

If you think I'm ending this sermon on that pleasant note, take heart, because the story serves one other very important purpose. The death of John the Baptist foreshadows a death that will happen later in the story, a death that bears many similarities, a man who spoke out against the leaders, a ruler who is hesitant to give the order for execution, the celebration of those in power, and the death of an innocent man. But this time, that man's death wasn't the end. After Jesus was killed on the cross he didn't stay dead, three days later he rose from the grave and conquered death itself! The world may hurt us, the leaders of countries may let us down, offering us up as a sacrifice, but our God is where our trust falls, and with God we hear the final Good News... That Jesus Christ, the son of God, was born and raised, suffered death and was crucified and died, but was risen from the dead three days later, having borne the sins of all humanity, giving everyone the opportunity of eternal life... now that's some good news... Amen.

³Donahue, John R., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Mark*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002. pp. 202.