

July 11, 2021. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray,

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us. Open us to your life-giving Word. Quiet the voices within us that do not align with your will. Focus our minds on the message you intend for us so we may faithfully discern your way. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 6, verses 14 through 29. Listen now for the word of the lord.

14 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." 15 But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." 17 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. 18 For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20 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. 21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 22 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." 23 And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." 24 She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." 25 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." 26 The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27 Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, 28 brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. 29 When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

The word of the lord. thanks be to God.

In college, I took a class on early christian Martyrs. And of all the martyrs we read about from those first few hundred years after Christ's death, when those first christians, trying to form a community and spread Christ's gospel were being persecuted by Rome, one story in particular has stayed with me.

It's the story of Perpetua. Perpetua was a young newly married woman around the turn of the 3rd century, 22 years old, and she was a new mother to her infant son.

She was born to a wealthy family, but unlike her family, she became a Christian.

She was with other Christians, when they were all arrested for refusing to acknowledge the deity of the emperor.

Perpetua's father visited her in prison and begged her over and over again to just acknowledge the deity of the emperor and save herself, but she refused.

Eventually, the group was sentenced to death in the arena by wild Beasts.

This was quite common in the roman empire at the time - prisoners were put into an arena while wild beasts (Boars, lions, etc) were let loose.

All as part of the gladiator games. Again, her father begged her to renounce her faith, but still she refused.

She was glad to die the death of a martyr.

So she went into the arena, faced the wild beasts, and somehow survived it. But as legend has it, the other christians who survived the wild beasts were gathered together, where they were to be killed by the sword by the roman gladiators.

But The gladiator who was tasked to kill Perpetua was young and unexperienced.

Perhaps he feared killing a woman, because as he went to stab her, his hands shook and he could not do it.

So, embracing her fate, she took his hand holding the sword, and cut her throat.

Now, I tell you this story, because similar to our scripture today, it is a bit extreme. It is full of excruciating, seemingly unnecessary violence and death.

These two stories are about 200 years apart, but they give us a glimpse into the world, the world of Jesus and John the Baptist and those early Christians in the Roman Empire during that time.

A world that was extremely violent and excessively gruesome.

A world lived in blatant contrasts.

Our world, our day to day lives, are pretty mundane and muted compared to Biblical times.

We live in neutrality, as they lived in extremes. So when we dive into the story of Herod and John the Baptist, and try to find meaning from it for our lives today, don't get so overwhelmed in the violence of it all that you miss what is hidden in plain sight.

We've spent a good amount of time in Mark in the lectionary recently.

So as we know, Mark is an intentional writer. He doesn't waste space - his gospel is short, and each word is planned and deliberate.

So there is intentionality behind this gruesome story.

The story of John the baptist and Herod is presented as a flashback. Herod hears word of Jesus and the works he has done - and his first thought is that Jesus is actually John the Baptist, raised from the dead.

And Then Mark tells us the story of how John the baptist died. The story is one filled with contrasts: power vs powerlessness, morality vs expectations and judgements, politics vs prophetic voices.

And what strikes me the most, what sits at the very center of it all, is Herod. Mark gives us an in-depth, honest, and almost haunting portrayal of Herod.

The Herod in our story was the son of Herod the Great. He no doubt grew up in the shadow of his father's great legacy, always wanting to prove his worthiness of the great name given to him.

And despite all the power that he had and the expectations he wanted to live up to... he finds himself somewhat entranced by John the Baptist.

This crazy wild unruly prophet who blatantly preaches against Herod's ungodly marriage to his brother's wife... our text tells us Herod listen to him, feared him as a righteous and holy man, respected him and his prophetic voice.

But his two worlds, two identities: the powerful ruler and the perplexed disciple, come head to head when his daughter demands John's head on a platter.

It's this choice when his daughter asks for John's head - a choice that seems to be his undoing.

What can he do? Does he betray his word in front of his daughter and all the powerful guests, therefore jeopardizing his own political power and image?

Or does he betray his heart - his admiration and fear and respect for this prophetic man of God?

It's a choice that seems to be his undoing. but at the heart of it all, hidden in plain sight, is grace.

That choice - that choice is a gift of Grace - waiting to be accepted or rejected.

As Cheryl Johns writes, "Here what is hidden is revealed. Herod is forced to chose between the innocent and the politically expedient. His moment of choice is a palatable moment of grace, waiting to be accepted or rejected. Herod's rejection of grace results in the death of John. But it is a thread of grace that continues in the narrative. It is a thread that is woven throughout the book of Mark, redeeming violence and suffering."

We think a lot, or I think a lot about grace. God's merciful grace bestowed upon us. I don't, however, and maybe you as well, think a lot about how even though grace is given to us - we have to accept it. And if we don't, we reject it.

When have we rejected grace? Can you think of a moment in your life where, perhaps that choice was grace - waiting to be accepted or rejected?

Although the day to day of our lives is more muted than Herod and John the baptist's world, we would be naive to say we live in a world without violence.

Violence seeps through our systems and culture - through all the shootings, to war, to death - violence is at our doorsteps.

But, just like Herod - in the midst of all that violence, are pockets of grace - choices given to us - grace waiting to be accepted or rejected.

And perhaps the hope of it all is that choice of grace is hidden in plain sight. We need not look hard for it - it is right there.

Maybe it is as simple as trusting our instincts.

For the preparation for worship I read a quote by Henry Nouwen - I'll read the full quote for you now.

“For most of my life I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. I have tried hard to follow the guidelines of the spiritual life—pray always, work for others, read the Scriptures—and to avoid the many temptations to dissipate myself. I have failed many times but always tried again, even when I was close to despair. Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not “How am I to find God?” but “How am I to let myself be found by him?” The question is not “How am I to know God?” but “How am I to let myself be known by God?” And, finally, the question is not “How am I to love God?” but “How am I to let myself be loved by God?” God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home.”

It's that gift of grace - we need not search for it - for God is searching for us - hidden in plain sight, giving us the gift of grace.

But even when life takes its toll, and we do reject that Grace - just as Herod did, there is still hope.

For Perpetua, that early Christian martyr, maybe her gift of grace was her father - begging over and over again to not die.

Perhaps that was God's gift of letting her choose life. But she rejected it.

Yet Christ still worked through her - her story helped shape early Christianity - her passion gave other early Christians the passion and faith to endure the many more hardships to come.

Our hope - like Herod, like Perpetua, is in Christ.

Christ working to make all things new - even the grace we reject.

For this we know - the nature of grace is a gift, able to be given and received, able to be rejected and taken away.

And this choice, too, is a gift - it makes us stay present, here and now, so we can see what is hidden in plain sight.

God longing to bring us home. And for that, thanks be to God. Amen.