

Pentecost 8, Proper 10. Saint Paul and Saint Luke parishes. July 14, 2024

Scripture

Amos. 7:7-15

Psalm 85

Ephesians 1: 3-14

Gospel of Mark. 6:14-29

Show us your Mercy and grant us your Salvation

The refrain from Psalm 85 read today fits the Gospel lesson and our need for redemption. More so than ever after last night's assassination attempt in Butler County, just north of Pittsburgh

(Moment of silence for the victims and former President Trump)

Last night's assassination attempt proves we haven't learned much since the time of Herod of Antipas.

Today's Gospel lesson is perhaps the most gruesome in the entire Bible. It also contains the longest conversation between a mother and a daughter - Herodias and her daughter.

"What should I ask for?" asks Salome (identified as Herodias the daughter in our lectionary). Herodias, the mother replies,  
"The head of John the Baptist."

I have to believe that there were many conversations between mothers and daughters that were never recorded in the Bible. Given this brief exchange, it's hard to fathom the depth of revenge that Herodias felt toward John the Baptist who was accused of her

adultery when she divorced her husband and married his brother. Inner family marriages such as theirs was considered a violation of Mosaic Law - the Laws of Moses as contained in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible.

Then, like now, royal marriages were instruments of international politics. John's prophecy against Herod Antipas' marriage to his brother's wife was politically incendiary.

"It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." Said John the Baptist.

In his life, John the Baptizer preached a baptism of repentance – a Greek word that is perhaps best translated as 'to change one's mind'.

This repentance acknowledges our brokenness, our wretchedness, the worm at the core of things – but it does not dwell there. This repentance is a transformation of outlook, a reorientation of life, a different way of seeing, that makes room for faith to emerge, for new life to start, for the righteousness of God to move through us like an ever-flowing stream.

God's righteousness speaks the truth but speaks it in love. God's righteousness sees beloved-ness in all of creation. God's righteousness invites the change of mind that is the conversion to faith, the discovery of the God-giveness and God-giftedness of everyone, even our enemies, even Herod.

The bad news is, not everyone gets it – at least at first. But the consolation of our faith is that, in the fullness of time, all things in heaven and on earth will be gathered up in Him. We cling to this when we are confronted with the prophetic voice, telling us the truths we would rather not hear. We cling to this when all around us seems to be falling apart. When our expectations for civil discourse are shattered by an assassination attempt like what we witnessed in Butler County last night. . Violence, retribution, revenge... All

these things are possible when we confuse God's righteousness with our own egos, with our diabolical certainty in our own truth.

Take the example of Herodias and her wicked demand of King Herod.

Herodias, Herod's new wife, had a grudge against John who put her to shame. She wanted to kill him.

Herod responded by putting John the Baptist in jail. But he was afraid to kill John because John had a large following and was known as a righteous and holy man. Herod wanted to protect John.

On his birthday, Herod gave a banquet. He danced with Salome, Herodias' daughter by her first husband and was so taken with her that he offered to give her anything she wanted - including half of his kingdom. She consulted with her mother who told her to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

Herod was grieved and upset but wanted to honor the oath he expressed to Salome. He ordered John's beheading by a prison guard. The guard presented John's head on a platter as she requested, who then gave it to her mother.

Can you imagine a more grotesque scene? What did the banquet guests do? Exit in horror we can only hope.

Ultimately, Herod and Herodias angered the Emperor Caligula who banished them to Gaul in 39 Common Era. Little is known of them after their exile.

Where is the good news in this awful story - the last sentence. The disciples, when they learned about John the Baptist's beheading, came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Murder, adultery, incest and power struggles are not new. Humans are sinners as this Gospel passage confirms. Herod's court was known for its decadence.

John's beheading by a Roman King is a precedent for Jesus' death on the cross, at the order of another Roman authority - Pilate.

Herodias' role is particularly odorous - she enacted her revenge by enticing Herod to dance with her daughter and took advantage of his oath to give her whatever she wanted. Her daughter is also named Herodias and/or Salome - just to make it more confusing.

Salome was manipulated by her mother to ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter. I don't think any of us would accuse Herodias of being a good mother.

Narcissistic and revengeful, Herodias may remind us of people we know or have known. People who don't seek repentance and continue to harm others.

Our challenge as followers of Jesus Christ is to follow his teachings and example - even if we run contrary to public opinion or government leaders.

These times are testing many of us as followers of Christ, to follow his TRUE example and not get caught up in a growing movement of Christian Nationalism, which insists on white supremacy and a singular religion.

America is a diverse society, home to people from all over the world, from different nations, religions, ethnic groups and gender preferences. Jesus teaches us that ALL people are made in God's image. No one is better than another. God loves ALL of us. The good and the bad.

Jesus understood the difference between following God and secular leaders.

Jesus said many times during his life - render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and render unto God that which is God's.

God is the Divine One who brought John the Baptist to live in his elderly mother Elizabeth's womb when she was beyond childbearing age. God is the Divine One who helped Mary conceive Jesus, the Son of God.

This afternoon we begin our VBS at Saint Paul, in collaboration with Ashley Church of God in Christ. During the next five days, 30 children will experience what life was like during Jesus' childhood. They will have encounters with shop owners, conversations with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Thomasina, her doubting sidekick.

Our goal is to help the children come to an understanding of who Jesus was as a child, and why he is the author of our salvation.

Herod, Herodias, Pilate and all those who led to the destruction of Jesus' earthly life, were sinners, who carried out their personal revenge against John the Baptist and Jesus. Their holy powers were seen as a threat to their dominions.

We live in a world with tension between government and religion just like the times described in the Bible. We live in a democracy where every vote counts. We come to church to worship God and pray for God's guidance.

This morning we need to pray for our country and pray for our democracy. We pray for the victims of yesterday's assassination attempt. We need to pray for redemption for the collective sin of gun violence that is tearing our country apart. Too many lives have ended or been damaged by America's addiction to weapons of mass destruction as means of revenge. We need love not guns to solve our problems and reconcile our differences. G

We need to stay faithful to the God who loves us and not be swayed by our own egos or sense of self righteousness. We need to see God's forgiveness and repent when our actions pull us away from God's beloved-ness.

Lord have mercy, and grant us your Salvation.

Amen.