

Whose Kingdom?

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I'll be blunt with you. If I had my choice about which passages of scripture appear in the lectionary we use year in and year out as the Biblical discipline for preaching and study, I probably wouldn't have included today's passage from the gospel of Mark. Though it appears in the Gospel, and gospel means "good news," it seems at first glance, at least, to be somewhat of a stretch to call this account "good news." In case you drifted off during the gospel reading, what we heard in that passage from Mark is the lurid account of the beheading of Jesus' precursor, John the Baptist, by the order of King Herod. This execution came at the behest of Herod's stepdaughter, at the urging of his wife, who had previously been Herod's brother's wife, and was, at the same time, Herod's niece. This is a family tree that should have had more branches. And, to make matters worse, Herod was persuaded to execute John the Baptist in the heat of his excitement over a provocative dance by his stepdaughter, who, if I calculate correctly would also be his second cousin.

The Herod mentioned in this passage is one of two Herods in the New Testament. The first is Herod the Great, whom we all remember from Matthew's account of Jesus' birth. It was this Herod the Great who tried to trick the Wise Men into revealing where Jesus could be found. And, when this ruse failed, he was the one who ordered the massacre of all infant boys in the area of Bethlehem. He hoped that by doing so he could thwart the prophecy that had brought the Wise Men to Palestine in the first place, that "the King of Jews" was to be born there. Herod believed that he could defy divine will by taking preemptive action. Brutal and autocratic rulers often think that they can buck the tide of history through cruelty. History proves them wrong.

Today's Herod, though, is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, and ruler of the Galilee, where Jesus' hometown of Nazareth was located. He was a chip off the old block. As we read, he ordered the beheading of John the Baptist. And later he had problems with Jesus as well. Luke records that when Jesus was attracting a significant following, Herod Antipas plotted to have Jesus killed, which in turned prompted Jesus to refer to him as a "fox." Herod Antipas was also in Jerusalem when Jesus was arrested and brought to trial before the authorities. According to Luke, Jesus was brought before this Herod, who was disappointed that Jesus didn't perform any miracles, became bored with him and then had him sent over to his best new friend, Pontius Pilate, after making sure that he had been beaten.

Both Herods were, in name and by choice, Jews. Both had complicated marital histories—Herod the Great had ten wives, serially, and we just heard of Antipas' unusual arrangement. Both were ambitious builders—the father began work on the third temple in Jerusalem, and the son had his own capital built on the Sea of Galilee and called it Tiberias in honor of his favorite Roman emperor. And because of that edifice complex both Herods imposed heavy taxation on their subjects, primarily the poorest of their subjects. The existential reality of those extortionate taxes is probably reflected in Jesus' prayer, what we call the Lord's Prayer, when we pray, "Forgive us our debts. . . ." Penury, indebtedness, loss of land and livelihood were sad features of the life of the less fortunate in Jesus' time. Both Herods, father and son, owed their status to their Roman sponsors and to the powerlessness of those they ruled. Both were roundly despised by their subjects, because of their oppression of the poor and because they were regarded as stooges of the Roman occupiers.

So--what in all of this sad saga can be called "good news?"

Well, dear friends, the harsh reality is that the good news that John foretold, and that Jesus brought to us in its fullness was not, and still is not, considered to be good news by everybody. John, after all, began his career as a prophet, as a lonely voice in the wilderness, with words that were both promising and threatening. “The Kingdom of God is close by! Turn your lives around!” To those on the wrong side of political and economic power, these were words of hope and promise. To those who wielded that power, these words could only be seen as a threat. One can imagine Herod asking himself, and then perhaps asking John, “*Whose* kingdom? I thought this was *my* kingdom.” What was good news for the oppressed, the victims of Herod’s excesses, was bad news for the oppressor, the one who benefitted from an unjust situation. No wonder that both John and Jesus paid the price for this good news; no wonder they were both executed by the authorities.

Herod, we’re told, was *interested* in what John had to say. Mark says that Herod was greatly perplexed by John, but that he liked to listen to him. His faith went no farther than his head, however. For Herod, John remained an intellectual curiosity, a fascinating teacher who could be easily disposed of if Herod’s own narrow self-interest demanded it. Herod was able to wall off his faith, to put it into a small corner of his life which he could visit periodically, but which he could keep imprisoned and under control like John the Baptist. It’s probably too easy for us to judge Herod on this account, because we sometimes do the same things to our own faith. We compartmentalize it; we control it; we keep it, at best, a Sunday morning affair.

For Herod, when it came time actually to make a decision, an existential decision, it was pretty much an *ad hoc* matter, and not a matter of faith at all. He had this ravishing stepdaughter to whom he had made a rash promise; he had an unhappy wife who regarded John to be her personal enemy. Yes, he was kind of sad about it, but you know, a promise is a promise, and there were the guests to take into consideration. So he asked for, and received, John’s head. Herod showed himself to be a master of short-term,

convenient and unprincipled decision-making. If his faith never got any farther than his head, his ethics never proceeded beyond his hormones, his personal pleasure. Herod was the poster boy for self-absorbed egocentrism. For the people he ruled, he must have seemed the incarnation of the ills of the kingdom of this world.

But what of the Kingdom of God that John and Jesus proclaimed to be at hand, the kingdom that was and is so threatening to the kings of this world? When Jesus was asked about the Kingdom of God, he didn't answer by expounding a political ideology, or a party platform. He didn't deliver a theological discourse. Jesus told stories, and he gave hints. What is the kingdom of God? Well, it's a place where the accepted wisdom will be turned on its head, where the meek will inherit the earth, where the lost will be found and received by God with the joy of a father whose profligate son suddenly appears on the road. The kingdom Jesus hinted at is a place where the first will be last, and the last first, where the dregs of society will be given seats of honor at a banquet that the important people in their arrogance and their illusions of self-sufficiency had spurned. The kingdom of God is the exact opposite of the kingdom of Herod.

But most important, when Jesus spoke of the kingdom, he spoke of a kingdom that had a purpose. He said that this kingdom will conform to God's hopes and plans for his beloved humanity. That this kingdom will embody God's will, and not the short-term self-interested whims of earthly rulers.

And that's what today's Epistle reading from the letter to the Ephesians is really about. From the outset of this letter Paul tells the Ephesians that God has a plan, It's not just a long-term strategic plan, it's a plan that existed before the foundation of the world. The plan is an expression of who God is, and of who God wants us to be. In that plan, we are destined for adoption—we, who were lost and abandoned, are to be members of God's family. And an essential part of that plan is Jesus, in whom and through whom we are redeemed. God is not the fickle dictator modeled out by the Herods of this world; he is

the caring parent of a far-flung family, which, in the fullness of time, will have a magnificent reunion. And God will do this through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, who is the most eloquent expression expression of God's abiding love for us.

So, where is this kingdom, this plan that John announced, Jesus proclaimed, and Ephesians lays out? Well, it's here and it's not here. It's already, and it's not yet. We see the not-yetness in war and injustice, in the ills of this world that we could spend a long time naming. There are still Herods who wish to run things, and wherever people endure needless suffering there is abundant evidence of the not-yetness of God's kingdom, God's plan. But, the Kingdom of God is near, says Jesus. The Kingdom of God is within us, or among us, already.

It's here. Already.

It's here if only we have the eyes of faith to see it. It's here when someone does the unexpected and the un-self-interested. When someone lays down his or her life for someone else, when someone gives sacrificially so that someone else might live more fully. It's here when love for someone who is different overwhelms the suspicion and fear that difference often engenders. It's here when a community extends its resources to people who need food, and, even more important, when that community extends its respect and love to those who are forgotten or marginalized.

Yes, when we are at our best, the kingdom of God may be found in this church, this congregation. Not only in the church, but, for sure, in the church when it is faithful. A time of transition and uncertainty—an interim time—can be approached as something to get through on our way to the next pastorate; or it can be approached as a time when we have the opportunity to ponder the essentials of what it means to be the church as we make ourselves ready for the next stage of our journey with our next pastor.

But let's conclude by going back to where we started with our friends, the Herods and where the good news is in what we read from Mark. Here it is: the Herods don't have the final say. According to tradition, the head of John the Baptist was entombed in Damascus in the Church of John the Baptist, which later became the Umayyad Mosque. It is venerated there by Muslims and Christians alike. But it is also supposed to be in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. In fact no fewer than nine places in the Middle East and Europe claim to be the resting place of John's remains. I know of no place that boasts of having the remains of any of the Herods.

It's God's plan that matters. God has a plan for our redemption, for the realization of God's kingdom. It is our mission to discern where God is working toward the fulfillment of that plan. It is our mission to be models of God's kingdom. Then we will live out our belief that it's Jesus who really does have the last word: The Kingdom of God is near!
The Kingdom of God is here!

Amen.