“Prophetic”

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Psalm 85:8-13; Mark 6:14-29

July 14, 2024

***Psalm 85:8-13***

***Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.***

***9Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.***

***10Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.***

***11Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.***

***12The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.***

***13Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.***

***Mark 6:14-29***

***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.” 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 Mark begins with the introduction of John the Baptist. According to Mark, it was after John was arrested that Jesus began his public ministry. Today’s text follows our most recent reading last week from the gospel of Mark, where we learned after much activity displaying Jesus’ authority over the Law, the wind and the sea, and over life and death, Jesus could not get much traction in his home town. Sending out his disciples two by two, Jesus even still, found a way to spread the news of God’s work through him.

King Herod, (the son of King Herod the Great who caused the wise men to return home by another way when Jesus was born) heard about all that Jesus was doing. He too was curious about the power this man had, and wondered who he could possibly be. Many were saying that Jesus was the prophet Elijah come back from the dead. “But when Herod heard of it, he said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.’”

And then, in a flashback scene, Mark tells us how John the Baptist happened to die, while in King Herod’s prison.

King Herod had a brother, Philip, who was married to Herodias. When Philip died, Herod married Herodias, something that John the Baptist told him he should not do. We’re told that Herod knew that John was a holy man and Herod protected him. But Herodias had a grudge against him because of what he said, so Herod had John arrested and bound and brought to prison.

Then Mark writes, “When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.” That last sentence, is only found in the Mark version of this story. Bookmark that thought for just a minute.

On one occasion of Herod’s birthday celebration all of the elite were present. Herod gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. Imagine then, when his wife’s daughter came in and danced for the guests, how a proud Herod, maybe a little too full of himself, and maybe too full of wine, thinking how wonderful he appears to his guests, he makes a lavish promise to her in front of all of the guests, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it. Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.”

Imagine the things of value Herod might have been imagining, that he would be willing to give his daughter. Gold, jewels, even half of his kingdom.

But she didn’t know what to ask for. Maybe she only wanted a pony. So she went to her mother. Her mother, Herodias, the one with a grudge against John the Baptist and wanted to kill him, saw her opportunity. What was of value to her, was not jewels or gold or even half of her husband’s kingdom. What was of value to her was revenge. Herodias’ reply to her daughter? “The head of John the baptizer.” There is much said about the motivations of the major players in this story. Herodias desire for revenge. Herod’s pride. The sexualization of the daughter made to dance for other men at the banquet. Herodias using her daughter to get her own revenge. But no one said anything about a platter, except the daughter. If the daughter was being manipulated, why did she ask for what her mother wanted, plus something? Why did she say “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” There aren’t many good guys in this story.

We may not understand the culture of ancient times and the workings of kings and their court, but we understand revenge. We understand love, protection, honor, pride, power, and we recognize the dark side of all of those things. We understand being overcome by the moment and feeling trapped between a rock and a hard place.

The bookmarked thought from earlier, King Herod was perplexed by John, but liked to listen to him, that gives us just a little insight into a part of King Herod that is not in any other gospel version of this story. Does this mean King Herod and John the Baptist had conversations, a relationship between the prison keeper and the imprisoned? When did King Herod listen to John? King Herod liked listening to John.

So when he was tricked into ordering the beheading of John, there must have been a moment that he might later replay in slow motion over and over. Taking in what his daughter said, glancing to his wife and recognizing that this was her wish, feeling humiliated and beaten by her trickery, in front of the whole court even.

We call this a choice point. Right there, in THAT moment, King Herod had a choice. He knew John to be a righteous and holy man. The season ending scene to this television drama cuts out right then. Instead of finding himself in a win-win situation, King Herod is in a lose-lose situation. He either looks a fool to the court by going back on his oath and promise to his daughter in front of his esteemed guests by refusing to grant the wish, or he suffers his own internal shame by killing a man he knows to be holy. One commentator says that THAT moment right there, is the grace of this story of political violence. The grace that is being given to King Herod is that choice. Choose integrity. Choose God’s way. Don’t give in to the pride and power and fear of humiliation. Do the right thing. Take the high road! But King Herod didn’t.

Having a choice is always a moment of grace. The sadness of this story is not just the political violence, it is the missed opportunity for grace.

The grace of God is not just forgiveness when we are wrong, mercy when we expect to suffer, or something clear cut and easy to choose. Sometimes grace is just space. Just space, pause, time, waiting. Grace, just sitting there, waiting for us to choose it.

Today we need to keep our eyes and hearts wide open and alert and make it our mission to find that grace that is just sitting there. We are at a choice point in this country today. The gospel reading as well as from Pennsylvania yesterday, show us painful sides of human nature. The political violence from yesterday was a sad display of the pressures our society is under and the lines we are now willing to cross. The fallout from that crossed line remains to be seen. In this moment in time, this major choice point, we need to do all that we can to resist rage, resist pessimism, resist revenge and unfounded assumptions. Resist giving up or giving in.

I can’t tell you the places my mind has gone in the last 8 hours. I feel the heat too. I feel the same urges to fight, to flee, to rage, to close my eyes to it all. Lately it feels like a sun burn that just won’t cool.

The psalmist wrote of this in Psalm 85. The psalm is written from the point of view of the Israelites upon returning to their land who believe that God has not returned with them. Let me read the entire psalm, so we can hear the first seven lines. In the first few lines the psalmist remembers God’s presence, then asks to be restored again, and then uses that memory to bring hope.

Lord, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

2 You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin.

3 You withdrew all your wrath; you turned from your hot anger.

4 Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us.

5 Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations?

6 Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you?

7 Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.

8 Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

9 Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

11 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.

12 The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.

13 Righteousness will go before him and will make a path for his steps.

“Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.”

Let us hear what God will speak, for God will speak peace.

Amen.