

July 11, 2021 7th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Amos 7:7-15, Ephesians 1:11-14,
Mark 6:14-29

[Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus for July 11, 2021, Greatly Perplexed, posted on July 4, 2021,
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3065>]

Grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.

When I finish reading a gospel like that

(about as grisly as they get,
a birthday party gone horribly wrong,
a beheading that we wouldn't dare read about to our children before bed),
...I wonder sometimes how to conclude.

Of course, I finished as I always do, The gospel of our Lord.

You responded, as you always do, Praise to you, O Christ.

But really? To say this is a tough gospel is an understatement.

Were you listening?

Did you wonder quietly: Where is the gospel message in this passage?

Where is God making life where we see only death?

Dear ones, it's tricky to find *that* gospel-life in today's passage.

If your response was a little quieter than usual,

or if it gives you pause, I'm with you, but let's see what we can find.

In my Bible, today's reading from Mark begins:

"King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known."

It's important to ask first, what IT is: What had King Herod heard about?

Now the helpful lectionary people that supplied our readings for this morning,

put in those nice brackets explaining that King Herod had heard about the disciples' preaching.

That's fair, I suppose, but I might go a little further.

Just before this, the verse prior reads:

"They cast out many demons and anointed many who were sick and cured them."

And then it continues, "King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known."

People are surmising who this Jesus fellow is,

this one who doesn't simply send out nice disciples who teach a good lesson or three,
but this Jesus who gives his disciples the power to cast out demons, to anoint and to heal.

Friends, as Mark tells it, Jesus, and his disciples, are doing big things:

removing the demons, raising the dead, binding the strong man,

pushing back against the empire's power, daring to follow.

...And Herod hears about it.

People wondered who this Jesus fellow might be.

Is this John the Baptist, the itchy-camel-hair-clad preacher, raised from the dead?

Is this Elijah, or one of the other prophets of old?

Is this some other, more current prophet?

Then Mark does a little rhetorical flashback to fill in the back story about John the Baptist.

A lot has happened since John baptized Jesus in the Jordan wilderness in chapter 1, and Mark lays it out:

How Herod had crossed boundaries with his brother's wife.

How John, ever the truth-teller, called him out and landed in jail.

How Herod throws a birthday party for himself and invites his stepdaughter to dance as the entertainment.

How he rewards this lovely dance, promising her any wish, pick a wish.

And how with her mother's sick guidance this obedient child wishes for John's head on a platter.

How Herod is caught between honoring this gory, public request,

and honoring, even fearing, what he knows of John.

How John's disciples come and carry away his body,

lay it in a tomb, with such tender compassion, such humanity,

an act that even Jesus' own disciples weren't able to do.

We certainly only know a bit of Herod Antipas's story.

Some the historians verify, others are left to our imaginations.

Mark writes that Herod feared John, and knew he was a righteous and holy man, so he protected him.

Herod liked to listen to John, but Herod was greatly perplexed by John.

I imagine Herod taking his stool to the prison and sitting outside John's cell,

talking with him, listening to John preaching, and teaching about Jesus.

I imagine Herod listening in that way we do when truths are being shared,

while it cuts, it also heals... and we feel it, we know it.

We lean in, we're curious, we come back for more.

We might not yet be sure what to do with this for ourselves,

but as one scholar writes, "We fear it and need it, all at once."

It might be easy to keep today's gory gospel at arm's length, I mean, we're not into beheading.

But I've been curious this week about scholar Debie Thomas' reflections.

She wonders if the message for us is more subtle, and I think she's on to something.

Do we, like Herod, care too much what others think?

Do we place reputation and status higher than truth?

Do we avoid conflict, preferring stability, even safety, more than transformation?

Or to ask Debie Thomas' more public questions:

"When I choose silence for the sake of convenience,
whose life becomes expendable?

When I decide that justice is too messy, chaotic, or costly for me to pursue,
who suffers in the long term?"

Questions like these get us probing deeper.

In many ways, they call us to push back against our own demons and the demons of our time,
our economics, our privilege.

The gospel I hear in today's passage uses Herod as the example of how **not** to act.

He was curious, yes, but he kept it all at arm's length, never willing to be changed by following.

Jesus calls us to come closer, to listen more deeply, to move from spectator to player,
full-bodied, in-it, engaged, trusting fully.

If I've learned anything from this last year, it's the need to have my body present in my faith:

Feeling the pain,

Knowing the tears,

Stretching a hand,

With each interaction, convicted by what I bring for better or worse,

and how we might follow Jesus more fully, more wholly in a time of great change.

That's what we're about, dear ones.

Amidst this gory gospel, and these subtle and deep questions,
there's a word today about calling.

Amos knows it when he says I am no prophet, just a herdsman, just a dresser of sycamore trees,
but the Lord said 'Go, prophesy.'

In Ephesians, the inheritance is passed down:

the word of truth,
the gospel of salvation,
the seal of the Holy Spirit's promise.

A promise and seal which you and I carry, marked with the cross of Christ forever.

It's our calling to live as Jesus' baptized,

to be beloved community:

all in, welcoming, healing, hoping, forgiving, feeding, reaching.

When we're tempted to say, I'm only this, I'm just that,

Go, Jesus says, Go and love as I have loved you.

Go, go and be part of the truth that pushes back against the powers.

Today in our liturgy, we welcome our new pastoral intern, Emily Brown.

Emily is part of a holy experiment at Luther Seminary called M.DivX.

M.DivX is new master's program to prepare leaders for ordained ministry in the church.

It's two years, year-round, with an intense line up of classes offered concurrently with a half time internship.

We are Emily's internship placement.

For the next two years Emily will be growing into and practicing ministry in our midst.

She'll be learning with us, and from us,

and we'll be learning from her.

Emily's mom is a pastor and Emily has been part of the church her whole life in a variety of roles.

Now, Emily is listening to her call to become a pastor herself.

She'll bring her other experiences working with youth, working in the office, working behind the scenes,

and she'll claim her own pastoral identity.

With learning comes trying new things, experimenting, making mistakes,

finding a pace and a way that's sustainable, faithful, effective, life giving.

Intern Emily will be supported through this process by an able Internship Committee

and a few others who have promised to be key supporters.

Later in our service we'll pray for not only Intern Emily, but also the Internship Committee, and all of us.

Emily's call, Amos' call, our call, is to follow closely the likes of John and Jesus

who pushed back against the demons of their time,

who understood the full-bodied need to trust it all, and to give ourselves over to grace.

It's all too easy, to keep this call at a distance,

like Herod, enjoying the story, but careful to skirt the big questions.

Thank goodness the truth won't let us go.

the Holy Spirit's seal and Jesus' love are relentless.

Dear friends in Christ, that's the good news for today, true as ever.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Amen.