

Sermon for Proper 10 Year B

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19 and Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

“John, whom I’ve beheaded, has been raised!”

Herod must have been terrified. A man like Herod, who relied on treachery, questionable political moves, the power gained through wealth, is confronted with his worst nightmare. He knew John was dead. He saw his head – yes, through a haze of drunkenness – but he saw the head. But this Jesus, obviously a man of power himself, is becoming known throughout Herod’s kingdom. Who is he? Could it really be John, raised from the dead? John, the man Herod killed because of a grudge, a grudge he held against him for telling the truth?

How very sad. How very tragic. And yet, because of what we’ve seen in our own lifetimes of the consequence of misused power, political greed and society’s belief that “it’s all about me,” we have to realize Herod has something to teach us.

Herod is an interesting character. What Benedict Arnold is to the word “traitor,” the name Herod has become to the word “evil,” but a sad kind of evil. In Herod we see a man desperate to be king. He killed his own relatives to gain the throne and then surrounded himself with sycophants, men who would use Herod’s favor to garner their own power.

The parties given by the king were as sick and sad as the participants were – days of feasting and uncontrolled drinking, entertainment that was sometimes less than respectable. Into this sad state of the political life of Israel, John the Baptizer dropped the embarrassing and dangerous truth. For this John lost his life because Herod was a fool and Herod’s character was terribly weak.

So today’s gospel tells us that this same Herod, who thought he had gotten rid of his adversary John, is now faced with a new adversary, Jesus. Herod had to be frightened. Who is this man he was hearing so much about? Could John have come back from the dead to haunt him, or was this someone new who would challenge his authority?

We know the answer and Herod would soon find out. Jesus was soon known by most as a man who taught with authority, who spoke the truth without fear, and who preached a return to faith by all Jews if they were to be truly children of God. And he broke the roles made up by weak men who were afraid of losing power.

While today’s gospel passage is mostly a bit of history, the letter from Paul to the Ephesians fills out what the people were saying about Jesus in Herod’s time. Paul helps us understand how we are connected to God. Paul reminds us of the amazing gifts we are given because God loves us. Instead of being afraid that Jesus is John raised from the dead, Paul says, “Blessed be God . . . who has blessed us in Christ with ever spiritual blessing in the heavens!” No fear here, just deep and joyful gratitude that we are empowered by God’s blessings. Paul goes on to tell us what some of those blessings are: adoption as God’s children, redemption through the blood of Jesus, forgiveness for our sins and grace lavished on us. Isn’t that a wonderful image? God’s grace being *lavished* on us! None of these things is a worldly gift. They are all of a heavenly nature, that we can, however, use here in our earthly lives. These gifts give us a spiritual authority and power that we must use to do good and to spread the Good News among our brothers and sisters.

There’s no comparison between this kind of power and authority and that of people such as Herod and Pilate or those before them: Ahasuerus in Esther’s time, Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel’s. Those people

built their power on fear and treachery. Our power comes from the deep and abiding love of God. Paul tells us that with all wisdom and insight, God has made known to us the mystery of his will.

That sounds, well, mysterious. Can we understand that? Yes, indeed, we can, because that will is simply that God wants to gather up all things in heaven and on earth into Himself. It is our inheritance. The question is, do we want this? Is being gathered up into God's love enough for us?

We have to ask that question seriously and truthfully. What does it mean to be gathered up into God here on earth? It's all fine and good to think about that being what happens in heaven, where all is supposed to be perfect love and union with God. But don't we often find that people still think that in heaven it will be "me and Jesus"? We seem to be fixated, here on earth, with deciding who gets there and who doesn't. Let's be honest about that. We want to be able to judge who gets there and who doesn't. We too often forget that Jesus constantly talked about the kingdom of God being right here, right now, too. Wait a minute – that means we ought to be living in this abiding love right now, with everyone.

But we are surrounded still with people like Herod and Pilate. People are fighting for power, literally – killing innocent people just to keep control over land and the gifts of the land. We can't get away from it. The TV and newspapers inundate us with images and blaring headlines that would kill any thought of living in love and peace we might have. And then, if we're honest, we, too, want some control. We want to have some kind of power; it's what society tells us is important.

Maybe this gospel about Herod is getting a little too close to home. It's no longer just a history lesson, it's a moral lesson, and we may find ourselves coming up short. We're not yet thrilled with Paul's words of the blessings of God's grace. But it's something we must learn to want more and more. We must want to be delighted in the thought that God *lavishes* his grace on us – *pours it out joyfully* – if only we'd be aware that it's happening and learn to bathe ourselves in that abundance. We might ask what the consequence would be if we could do this. It would change our lives. We might see the beauty in all God's people and be willing to take their hands when solidarity for good is needed. We might see our churches begin to fill again because others would see our witness and want to share what we have. We'd learn to speak about our faith in convincing and inviting ways.

Unlike Herod and others like him, we wouldn't have to fight and connive and fawn over others so that power would be ours to abuse; we have the power of a loving God supporting us. We have the inheritance of the saints in light. We have the example and teachings of Jesus to show us the way. It's a much better power. It's a much more loving and peace-giving authority. We too can *lavish* our care on God's world and on God's people if we set our minds and hearts to it. Remember, Paul tells us we are marked with seal of the Holy Spirit. We are destined to be God's people here on earth. We can make no other choice.

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