

Weekend of Sunday, July 15, 2018

8th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 15/Proper 10/Year B

Primary Text: Mark 6:14-29

Sermon Title: “A Righteous and Holy One”

Theme

As Jesus and his disciples begin to attract attention, Mark recalls the story of John the Baptist’s martyrdom. Like John, Jesus and his disciples will also suffer at the hands of those opposed to the gospel of salvation.

Text

¹⁴King Herod heard of [the disciples’ preaching,] 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.

Sermon

Ish? Really? This is what I have to work with today? When I got together with my colleagues to discuss the texts for this weekend, one by one, we went around the table telling each other what text we were going to preach on and how we were going to go about doing that. And that is because this Gospel Reading is gruesome and let's just name it, it has some creepy sexual overtones that we in our culture today, find unacceptable.

The Gospel Reading begins with John the Baptizer in prison, and then Mark goes back in time to tell us how he got there.

John the Baptizer is a favorite NT hero to many, and that is probably because he was so downright weird. We are re-introduced to him each Advent and that is because he is recognized in Christianity as the forerunner of God's Messiah. In his birth narrative the Archangel Gabriel visited Zechariah and Elizabeth and told them that even though they were old, they were going to finally have a child, a son, who will be "great in the sight of the Lord." (Luke 1:14) And as he grew up, not only was he "great in the sight of the Lord" he was also downright weird – eccentric might be the more polite way to describe him.

This is not the time to go into all his idiosyncrasies, but as I have come to believe, it was likely how God created him. God gave him the gift to be singularly focused on his own mission and ministry, which was to prepare the way for the Lord.

John was not only odd but was also known as a fire-and-brimstone preacher who called it like he saw it and cared not what anyone thought of him, including the Pharisees and Sadducees whom he called a "brood of vipers" (Matthew 3:7).

Do you like a good fire-and-brimstone sermon shouted at you now and then? Some of you might. I do. Herod did too. In fact Mark wrote that Herod enjoyed listening to John and even feared him because he was ²⁰"a righteous and holy man". But Herod had another problem besides John, and that was his wife, Herodias.

You see, as I said earlier, John spoke truth to power and that included publicly denouncing Herod as a sinner guilty of the disgusting and unlawful marriage to his brother's wife. Yea, that got John thrown into prison.

But putting John in prison was not the end of Herod's trouble regarding John. Herod's wife Herodias wouldn't get over John and so when she saw an opportunity to force her husband to have him killed, she struck. The details are just creepy and high in ick-factor to the point that I am not going any farther with it.

In fact, I would not be surprised if there are some among the congregation today wondering why this story made it in the lectionary cycle in the first place and what possible preaching value it has. Hang with me, I'm going to bring it.

The First Reading for today comes from the OT prophecy of Amos. Amos was also a different kind of prophet. He described himself as ^{7:14}"a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees" not a professional prophet or even the son of a prophet. And yet one called upon by the LORD to speak truth to power. The setting for his ministry requires me to tell you a little OT history.

There was a point in Israel's history that they demanded a human king like all the other nations they encountered. They selected Saul who turned out to be a terrible king. God himself replaced Saul with David, a man after God's own heart. After David died his son Solomon became king. But Solomon was no David and that led to rebellion and a schism in the kingdom. The Israelites split into two kingdoms, the northern tribe retained the name Israel but the southern tribe was called Judah. Two kingdoms with two kings and each kingdom had its own places of worship. None of this pleased the Lord, who decreed that there would always be a descendent of David on the throne, in the capital city of Jerusalem, where there would be one Temple where all Israelites would worship and make sacrifice.

Enter the prophet Amos, an unlikely prophet, but one whom God obviously saw as a righteous and holy man. Amos' job was to bring a word of judgment from God against the Northern Tribe of Israel and its king, King Jeroboam II through the King's prophet, Amaziah.

God gave Amos a vision that is pertinent to this sermon. God gave Amos a vision of a plumb line. (Pic) Now a plumb line is string with a pointy weight called a plumb bob hanging from it that will form a perfectly straight vertical line from a place above to a place below.

Allow me to give you an illustration of its usefulness. Recently I have been building a room in my basement and I erroneously presumed that the distance I measured from the basement wall to a wall I am erecting would be the same at the top of that same wall I am erecting once I have it perfectly vertical. But it is not. Most likely, the cinder block wall is not perfectly vertical and that caused me to make mistakes. Had I marked the distance on the floor and then used a plumb line I could have determined where the top of the wall I am erecting had to be to be perfectly vertical without regard for the actual dimension it was away from the wall – because everyone wants vertical walls.

God used that illustration of the plumb line in his vision given to Amos to tell the Northern Tribe of Israel and its king, King Jeroboam II, and the king's prophet, Amaziah, that they had crossed the line in their sinfulness. Not only had they separated themselves from the rest of Israel and created their own places of worship where pagan gods were worshiped, the King and his minions were haughty and overconfident and lived opulently while they oppressed the poor. They had crossed the line illustrated by the vision of the plumb line.

Now how do you think was received? Not so good. It would be like the head coach of the Ohio State University telling the head coach of the University of Michigan how to play the game of football.

Amaziah's reply is succinct and can be found in verses 12-13:

¹²Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

In other words, you and your message go back to where you came from.

Some of you will want to know so I will tell you. King Jeroboam II did die by the sword and the Northern Tribe of Israel would fall to the Assyrians.

Well, the word of the LORD may not be welcome, but it is still the word of the LORD, so there is really only one appropriate response; repent and return to the Lord.

Say, that sounds familiar doesn't it? Those words are similar to the words that John the Baptizer preached as he came onto the scene and told people that they needed to repent and return to the Lord for Messiah was coming! And now we see the connection of these two readings.

The point is that God in God's mercy gives his people rules to live by. And occasionally, when the rules don't work, God gives his people prophet, righteous and holy ones to deliver words of warning. This is not because God is a kill-joy and doesn't want us to have a good time, but because bad behavior will lead to our destruction. We simply cannot do whatever we want or we will self-destruct. And so out of great love we are given parameters, lines we cannot cross, so that, as we prayed in the Prayer of the Day, we "may live in peace and quietness."

And when we cross those lines we should not be surprised that things go badly. Is God punishing us? That is a good question. There is certainly biblical precedent that God does punish those he loves. But I also think that when a person or a nation goes its own way, and that way is away from God, then they can expect to find trouble on their own.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Amos and John were prophets, righteous and holy ones sent by God to tell God's people to repent from their sinfulness and return to the Lord. These two stories are stories that illustrate God's great love for his creation.

I will admit today's Gospel Reading is grizzly. But sometimes life is like that. And while there certainly is a tradition of martyrdom in Christianity that lifts up the virtue of dying for the cause of Christ and his Gospel, I am not advocating seeking out martyrdom. I think the point of both of these stories is that we need to heed God's call to repentance and return to the LORD.

But we can look to Amos the Prophet and John the Baptizer as examples of faith and determination even in the face of danger and death. Humble Amos went to his enemy and spoke truth to power and got away with it. John knew Jesus Christ and believed that he was the Messiah of God, and with faith in him he trusted that the promise of salvation and life eternal with God was his. What more could he live for, and more could he die for?

My Raisin' the Bar Challenge for you this week is to reflect on these two prophets of old who are described as "righteous and holy" ones and their message.

Amos and John were not "righteous and holy" because of anything they did, even though they lived lives replete with good works and are good examples of faithfulness for us. They were made righteous by God's love, grace, and mercy, and made holy by their devotion to God. We can have that same "righteous and holy status"!

If there are areas of sin in your life (and just let me say to you, there are) and you sense God is speaking to you (and let me add, God is), then repent and return to the LORD. God has planned a great reward for a life of faithfulness and he wants us to use this time to prepare ourselves for it.

And while it is also true that all the faithful living and goods works alone won't get us into the Kingdom of Heaven, when done in faith our faithful living and good works please God and demonstrate our love and devotion to his Son and our Savior Jesus Christ. And that is a good definition of a righteous and holy one.

Prayer

Loving, graceful, merciful God, out of your great love, you want nothing but the best for us, and desire that we would be righteous and holy ones devoted to you. That requires our diligence in obedience. When we wander from your way, send us prophets to draw us back to you, so that we might live in peace and quietness. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen