

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10)  
July 11, 2021  
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Amos 7:7-15  
Psalm 85:8-13  
Ephesians 1:3-14  
Mark 6:14-29

*Church building closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: the church is open at [www.trinitybend.org](http://www.trinitybend.org).*

You may recall a time when Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And maybe you recall the answers they gave: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets.

Something like that happens at the start of this morning's gospel. Except here Herod ponders the question. "Jesus' name had become known," Mark tells us, and Herod wants to know more about him. He gets the same answers: John the Baptist, Elijah, or maybe he's a prophet.

Herod settles on one of those possibilities. It's John the Baptist, he says. It's John, raised from the dead. And because Herod opts for that option, we hear of the day he had John beheaded.

Before we get all wrapped up in the terrifying drama of all that, hang on to the question at the start. This horrific story is supposed to tell us something about who Jesus is (which is easy to forget because we never hear Jesus' name mentioned again in this passage from Mark).

I'll come back to that, but first today's gospel. It's a vile story. It's horrific. Full of hard realities that the powers-that-be typically respond poorly to those who tell them what they do not want to hear. Which is nothing new. It echoes what we heard in our first reading this morning.

I happened to mention to Marianne Borg this past week that our first reading would be from Amos, and she told me that reading the Book of Amos had once sparked a conversion in Marcus Borg. I'd never heard that before, so I did a little digging and found a piece Marcus wrote about that conversion experience. This is part of what he had to say about it:

Amos was the trigger. In my junior year in college in a political philosophy course, we spent a week on Amos. The encounter stunned me. Speaking in the name of God, he passionately indicted the powerful and wealthy of his time because they had created an economic system that privileged them and inflicted misery and suffering on most of the population.

Prior to that class, I had no idea that there was anything like this in the Bible ... I had grown up with the Bible and had memorized more verses than anybody I knew. But nobody had ever asked me to read Amos or any of the prophets. I knew of them primarily through isolated verses that we understood to be prophecies of the coming of Jesus. The prophets were "predictors" of events centuries in the future from their point in time. It had not occurred to me that Amos and the prophets in general might have had a message for their own time and place.<sup>i</sup>

What Marcus discovered in his junior year was that prophets weren't fortune-tellers so much as they were truth-tellers. They spoke hard truths to those in power. They spoke God's truth.

But the wealthy and powerful do not respond well to such truths. Amos decried the leisurely lifestyle of the wealthy and powerful. They enjoyed their comforts and their feasts and their entertainments, but were not troubled by the struggles, the losses, the challenges, of others (Amos 6:4-6). Amos invoked the image of a plumb line, a vivid way to say that they failed to line up with what God expected of those with the means to do better. And nobody in charge wanted to hear it. They wanted to be rid of this would-be prophet who spoke for God.

So, too, John the Baptist decried the lifestyle of the wealthy and powerful Herod. John told Herod what he didn't want to hear. And Herod put John in prison, hoping to be rid of him.

But one day, the day we hear about in this morning's gospel, Herod throws himself a party. He invites the wealthy, the powerful, the elite of their day to gather with their king to enjoy their comforts and their feasts and their entertainments.

And among the entertainments is the moment when Herodias dances.

I suspect we imagine the scene from the movies. We imagine her dancing provocatively, maybe seductively. And maybe that's how it was. But probably it wasn't.

All Mark actually tells us is that the child – probably just a 12 year-old girl (the same word is used to describe her as Jairus' daughter, who was just a 12 year-old) ... she danced (and again there's nothing inherently provocative about the word used) and her father was delighted by it all, so he promised her the world.

Maybe she danced seductively or maybe, as I think, she danced like a child. But it hardly matters. How she danced isn't the point, because she's not the point. She's not the one to blame here. She's just a kid. Blame the adults. She doesn't even know her own mind. It's not her idea to ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter.

We're told Herod was "deeply grieved" by her request. And maybe he was, but he gives his daughter what she asks for without hesitation. Immediately he orders a soldier to do the deed. And the soldier doesn't question, the order; he does as he's commanded.

Mark says that Herod was tricked into doing this, that he had to give in to a devious scheme to save face. But I don't buy it. After all, if his little girl had taken him at his word and asked for half of his kingdom, he would have had to say no. Rome would never have let him put a girl in charge. No, he didn't need to give in. The decision was his. And he made it.

The prophet was merely inconvenient in the end. And the child who danced that day was just a pawn.

I think that's the story we heard this morning. It's horrific. It's terrible. And it's still the way the world works. Prophets are a nuisance. And the innocent get used by those with their own agenda.

And if that was all there was to say, then the moral of the story might be nothing more than the hard truth that unwanted truths can get a prophet killed. There is no good news in that.

So now I remind you of what I said at the start, that this is a story about who Jesus is.

You see, the execution of John the Baptist isn't the end of the story. It's just where we leave it off today. His beheading is just a prelude to what comes next. We'll skip over that next Sunday, and that's unfortunate, because what comes next, as Mark tells it, is the account of Jesus feeding thousands of hungry people who had followed him out to a lonely place. \*

Mark tells us that Jesus looked out at the hungry crowd and they were, in his eyes, "like sheep without a shepherd."

Kings were supposed to be like shepherds. That's the biblical metaphor. Kings were supposed to look out for the sheep entrusted to their care. They were supposed to feed them, protect them, provide for them and keep them safe. But all too often – and Herod is a case in point – kings used those placed into their care for their own purposes. They abused them, fed off them, manipulated and exploited them.

Mark could have told the story of John's beheading anywhere in his gospel, but Mark recalls this memory of royal violence as prelude to the day when Jesus looked out at a hungry crowd – "sheep without a shepherd" – and told his disciples to feed them. That's who Jesus is.

Barbara Lunblad describes this as a contrast between "Jesus' banquet of life," on one hand, "and Herod's banquet of death." This morning's gospel shows us Herod for who he truly is, that we might see Jesus in stark relief for who he truly is, and what he offers.

Jesus' banquet of life is a banquet of mercy. Rather than taking place in a lavish palace where only a few are welcomed, it takes place in the great outdoors, under a sun that shines on us all. Rather than courting the privileged elite, the poor and the outcast flock to be with Jesus. Rather than intrigue and power plays, blessing and surprising abundance are the hallmarks of this new day. Jesus would, in the end, give up his own life rather than take another's. For rather than serving up death on a platter, Jesus serves up life that overflows the baskets. <sup>ii</sup>

That's who Jesus is.

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\* We skip over Mark's account of the feeding of thousands (Mark 6:34-44) next week, I think, because we will hear John's version of the feeding of a large crowd in a couple of weeks.

Whenever we look around and see the world as it should NOT be, Jesus is the one who shows us a better way to live in this world, who opens the door to a way of living where all could be fed if we would but share what we have.

That doesn't mean it's safe or easy. After all, this morning's gospel ends with the sobering reminder that when John the Baptist's disciples heard what had happened, "they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb." And that's a moment that foreshadows the day when someone else took Jesus' body from the cross "and laid it in a tomb."

But we know that the tomb is not the end of the gospel story. The powers-that-be may do their worst, but that doesn't mean we need to settle for abiding by their rules for a dog-eat-dog world. We are invited to aspire to live as children of God, a beloved community. After all, as Mark and the other evangelists tell it, Good Friday is the prelude to Easter Sunday, and a tomb is but the beginning of a story that proclaims that love is stronger than death.

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<sup>i</sup> Marcus Borg @ [https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003860/marcus\\_borg\\_amos\\_and\\_american\\_christianity](https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003860/marcus_borg_amos_and_american_christianity).

<sup>ii</sup> Barbara Lundblad @ [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002733/two\\_very\\_different\\_banquets](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002733/two_very_different_banquets) and David Lose @ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/07/pentecost-7-b-a-tale-of-two-kingdoms/>.