

“More Than We Can Perceive”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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Ephesians 1:3-14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Mark 6:14-19

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.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

For 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. For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him.

Will you pray with me? Send your spirit among us, oh God, as we listen for your word to us today. Amen. Have you ever been haunted? Have you ever made an awful mistake? Committed a deed that you'll always regret to the end of your life? You do all you can to put it in the rearview mirror only to have some reminder pop up again right in front of you. King Herod is hearing reports of Jesus's growing popularity. Crowds are gathering wherever Jesus is speaking. Herod is insecure about his own status as a leader. He gets spooked, "Is Jesus really John the Baptist come back to haunt me?" He worries. Mark, the gospel writer, sort of side steps and takes the time out in his gospel to give us the context for why Herod is so freaked out. First of all, let's name the players because it gets a little complicated.

There's Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee (i.e King Herod). There's Phillip, Herod's brother. There's Herodias, wife of Philip, who leaves him to marry her brother-in-law Herod. Can you imagine what holiday barbecues were like in this family? Then there's Herodias' daughter, named Herodias by Mark. But known by the Historian Josephus, as Salome. And that's probably the name we know her best by. And John the Baptist, who - as prophets do - calls Herod out, criticising him for stealing his brother's wife. Now the one who seems most offended at being publicly criticised by John is Herodias. Herod, on his part - the scripture tells us - is greatly perplexed, yet he likes to listen to John. John the Baptist seems to have had a hold on Herod's heart, Herod's conscience. And yet, Herod mollifies his shamed wife by throwing John into prison at her insistence.

Then Herod unwittingly puts himself into a devil's bargain. At a birthday party, he throws himself, for his officers and court officials, Salome dances for all the guests. Herod flushes with fatherly pride and perhaps some strong drink, can't do enough to praise his daughter's performance. "Whatever you want my daughter is yours. Even half my kingdom." Little does he imagine that Salome will run to her mother and return with a request that must have made Herod's heart sink, "I want John's head on a platter." Another preacher named this gory digression in Mark's gospel, "Birthday gone bad." Indeed. What does this story tell us about Herod? Is he somebody who lets other people determine his agenda? Does it tell us the lengths to which an insecure leader will go to avoid the humiliation of having to renege on a vain boast? How does Herod live with himself, we wonder? And yet he didn't hesitate to take his brother's wife.

Even more importantly, what does this story tell us about ourselves? How do we live with our own errors? How do we live with our souls when we override our misgivings and do something we regret? How do all of us proceed in this world in the face of evil that we visit upon one another? We don't have to go back far in our nation's history to discover our own blindness, our own evil. How do we live with the memory of our denomination's fractures over slavery? How do we live with the trail of tears? How do we live with Japanese internment camps? How do we live with separating young children from their parents to stay within chained link concrete pods? How do we live with viewing other human beings as threatening, faceless others, from whom we need protection? How do we live with human nature, when world rulers - to advance their own needs for opulence and power - ride roughshod over the welfare of starving citizens? We are capable of terrible things and as we see in this disturbing story, speaking up about injustice does not guarantee a happy ending.

Mark writes, in the wake of Romans having just destroyed Jerusalem's temple, "The way of the world," he reminds us, "Is for the status quo to come down hard on those who call them out." This story of John is a foreshadowing, as we know, of what will happen to Jesus. Down to the very details of the disciples rescuing his body and placing it in a tomb. Scholars point out that nothing Mark the gospel writer does is arbitrary. He places this story about a grizzly banquet just before the tale of another meal. A profound meal in which Jesus gathers the hungry crowds, fragments of fish and bread and feeds five thousand people. Two meals that could not have been more different. One of egos and fear and closed fists and death. The other of trust and life and open hands. So I wish we didn't have to confront John the Baptist's violent death. I wish we didn't have to continually wrap our minds around Jesus' humiliating and on a criminal's cross. And yet our capacity to turn away from good and choose evil puts Jesus on that cross again and again.

Is there any good news? A professor named David Lose gave me a foothold out of the mire at this point in my own reflections on this story. Lose repeats the promise of the gospel, "Jesus came to help us imagine that there is another story. Jesus helps us imagine that there is more to life than we can perceive." So I want to share with you just such an example. At a medium security prison in Vacaville, California, live 24 hundred men. Some are young and healthy. Others are disabled, sick, or dying. Here is a peek inside, as it comes to us from a New York Times feature writer, named Suleika Jaouad. She writes, "Inked in tattoos from neck to knuckle, Kevion Lyman rises from his bunk at dawn, pulls scrubs over his skinny frame, steps out of his cell and sets out for work. Past the different wings of the facility, the dining hall, the solitary confinement unit for violent offenders, the psych ward. Kevion pushes open big steel doors to report for his morning shift in the hospice unit. In this facility, incarcerated workers actually compete for the opportunity to pull 10 to 15-hour shifts to care for patients nearing the end of their lives. Earning less than 35 cents an hour. They work with the medical staff; brushing teeth, massaging sore limbs, providing haircuts, reading to their care receivers, and keeping vigil when death is near.

Another hospice worker is 29-year-old, Kao Saepanh. The son of Latino immigrants, who arrived in California after the Vietnam war, Kao fell into a gang when he was in middle school, trying to impress his

older and cooler cousins. At age 17 he killed a man during a Halloween party brawl. And now Kao cares for a 79-year-old hospice patient named Ernest, about whom rumors swirl. Rumors that Ernest's crime was especially gruesome. Hospice workers here say they work hard not to learn much about the past offenses of those for whom they care. Kao is determined to treat Ernest the same way he would any of the other hospice patients. Of his work, Kao says, "I'm returning something I didn't get as a kid. All I wanted was kindness. Now I get to do that for somebody else." And so Kao finds shoes for Ernest, whose own are falling apart. Kao keeps his eye out for anything in the prison store that Ernest might enjoy. Indeed, this dying man, under Kao's tender care, has changed. From an angry, isolated individual who steals from other inmates. to someone who now tells bad jokes and dances around in his wheelchair doing the boogie-woogie, snapping his dentures in the air like castanets--it's been a transformation.

At this California medical facility, two dozen specially trained Pastoral Care Service Workers provide dignified deaths to their fellow inmates. The Presbyterian Chaplain - who supervises the program - notes that most of these hospice workers are convicted murderers themselves, serving life sentences. And he goes on to let us know that nationally, about 25% of federal inmates return to prison within eight years of their release. Of these pastoral care workers, who go on to earn their freedom, the recidivism rate is just a little over 1%. Jesus helps us imagine that there is more to life than we can perceive. Our perspectives and imaginations are limited. If you'll go with me and sort of suspend reality for a moment. I think about this question, what if Vacaville Prison housed inmates like John the Baptist and Herod Antipas? The Apostle Paul and Herodias? Jesus and Judas Iscariot? Fill in the names of murderers, prophets, saints and sinners, alike. Who's to say which becomes a hospice patient and which becomes a caregiver? Who's to say which of us lies outside God's capacity to use for good.

So the first story today is about our capacity to do terrible things to one another. The other story is about our capacity - through receiving dignity and love, being marked with the seal of God - to do beautiful things. As David Lose puts it, "The second story is about God's effort to redeem us. God's tirelessness in the course of history to bend evil towards greater good." Thank God for the second story, which through Jesus, has the last word. If we are feeling hopeless about the hold of sin and cruelty in our world, Jesus gives us hope that there is more than we can perceive. So it is our calling, as the Lord's own, to name evil fearlessly, to speak hope boldly, and to work without ceasing towards a future already shaped by God the potter's masterful hand. Hallelujah. Amen.