

Sermon
7 Pentecost—Proper-10-B
Saint Andrew's, Methuen
July 11, 2021
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Amos 7:7-15
Psalm 85:8-13
Ephesians 1:3-14
Mark 6:14-29

I want to suggest that what we just did is quite odd. We read the story of how John the Baptizer, that great prophet of God, is beheaded by the petty tyrant Herod Antipas, in order to please his wife and his drunken party guests.

Then we said:

The Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you Lord Christ.

Really? The story of this ruthless and meaningless murder is good news for which we should praise Jesus Christ?

Where is the good news in that?

The first thing to say is that the Good News story is never just about making me and my tribe safe and happy, for it is also about Christ overcoming the powers and principalities of this world. That's why the Christmas story begins with Augustus Caesar taxing his conquered people and the Crucifixion story includes Pontius Pilate, a petty Roman bureaucrat who even made it into the Nicene Creed.

The people who say preachers shouldn't talk about politics obviously aren't paying attention to the Jesus story.

Second, the story of Herod killing John the Baptizer points to the emptiness and vanity of worldly power that denies God.

Stanely Hauerwas in his commentary on this story says, "Herod exists in **an unreal world** created by and for those who occupy positions meant to sustain the illusion **that they are accountable only to their own desires.**"

Such political leaders who believe they are "**accountable only to their own desires**" create for the rest of us a world of violence, vengeance and vainglory.

For the past five years I've been supporting the ministry of Compassion International to help Smaille, a 15-year-old girl who lives in Haiti, and I wonder what she and the rest of that poor country are thinking after the assassination of their president and the rampaging of gangs in the capital.

The good news tells us that God is taking back his world from such violent men and women through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ.

And therefore, by reading this story of John's death we are proclaiming Jesus and the victory of God, even as the corrupt powers **abuse the people, kill the prophets, and hang Christ on the Cross.**

But it's not easy when we see the triumph of evil to feel anything other than **helpless and hopeless**, which is probably how John's disciples feel when they come to claim his headless body.

Or we decide to fight back against Empire with our own **violence, vengeance and vainglory.**

Jesus, however, rejects both options. He rejects hopelessness AND he rejects violence.

Which leaves what?

It leaves us with the strategy of having God **change our own consciousness**, so we can change the world through soul force.

Paul understands this when he tells the church in Ephesus: "...you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds.... alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart.... ²⁰ That is not the way you learned Christ! ²² You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded... and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

Paul tells the church in Rome which is living in the heart of the beast: "Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. **You'll be changed from the inside out.**" Romans 12 [The Message](#)

This reminds me of a wonderful 2015 movie called "Inside Out" created by Disney Pixar—which means it is a cartoon but not just for kids.

It tells the story of an eleven-year-old girl, names Riley, who moves with her family from a happy, suburban existence in Minnesota to a harder urban one in San Francisco: she now has no friends in school, no teammates on a hockey team, and parents who are as overwhelmed by the move as she is.

What makes this movie thought provoking, however, is the real action isn't outside, in the interaction of people and events, but inside the head of its characters, most specifically inside the head of Riley: for inside, at a control center in her mind sit five emotions running the show: joy, sadness, anger, fear, and disgust. They are the driving force as they react to what happens to her.

But when sadness and joy fall out of the control center, all she has left to guide her are fear, anger, and disgust.

When we are operating out of this lower level of our ordinary minds, what Paul calls the old self, we too are being run by fear, anger, and disgust without even being aware that there are any other options.

But we always have options, which is why Paul prays for the church in Ephesus by saying:

"I pray that... you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love."

+++ "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...."

In other words, we are to give Christ the central seat at the control center of our mind. ***If it's just ordinary us against the powers of this world the powers will win. But if it is Christ in us against the powers, we will change our world from the inside out.***

Are we aware that we can move beyond ordinary mind into the mind of Christ?

When Jesus learns that Herod has murdered John, he withdraws to a quiet place to grieve and pray for guidance: ***what will be his response: will he become hopeless or now turn to violence?***

What he does instead is teach 5000 people about the presence of the Realm of God in their lives and at the end of the day demonstrates this by feeding them with bread and fish.

When we are young, we talk about what we will do for God to resist the violence and vainglory of tyrants, but when we enter the second half of life and realize there is violence and vainglory in our own hearts, we need to hear about what GOD has done and is doing to transform our minds, so that we may take up our cross and demonstrate the Good News of God in Christ.