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Lessons: Amos 7:7-15 and Mark 6:14-29

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.

That story is not the normal "good news" we are accustomed to reading in worship. *Healings...* let's read them! *Parables...* let's jump right in! *Beheadings...* a hard pass. The violence of this

story isn't the only difficult part. Perhaps the hardest part of basing a sermon on this passage is that Jesus doesn't even make an appearance in it!

The first person who does appear is King Herod, and even that can be confusing. There are six Herods who are mentioned at different points in the New Testament. Truth be told, every single one of them was corrupt and immoral, which isn't surprising because this Herodian dynasty began when Herod the Great paid off the invading Caesar to name him the king of the Judean province.

The Herod who is mentioned in today's passage is Herod Antipas, and -- I am so sorry to break this news to you -- he was not a very upstanding character. From this point forward, I'm just going to call him Herod. The act that gave Herod notoriety then and now was his marriage to his sister-in-law, Herodias. Now, when you and I think of any siblings-in-law we might have and the prospect of marrying them, it is safe to say that it would be weird at best. But simply marrying his sister-in-law isn't Herod's whole story. Mark doesn't get into the lurid details, but --oh!-- did the historians of the day discuss this filthy scandal. See, it is not as if his brother, Philip, were dead already when Herod took his wife. Nope. And it is not as if Philip and Herodias were already divorced. Nope again. Herod craved Herodias while she was still married to Philip, so Herod abused the power of his throne to obtain her. On top of all that, Herod was already married to the daughter of a foreign king. That marriage had been arranged to seal a peace treaty. So Herod had to divorce that wife before marrying Herodias, which later led to a war against his former father-in-law. It was a war, so it resulted in sizable deaths, and it was only fought because Herod wasn't satisfied with what he already had. If there is a silver lining to any of this, it's that the war culminated in the humiliating defeat of Herod.

Who needs soap operas and shows like "Game of Thrones" when you have the Herod family, am I right? In just this one particular Herod we find corruption, lust, war, and the abuse of power. Then the gospel lesson reveals a party scene of debauchery, sensual dancing, and drunken promises. When that is the list of vices being rolled out, the only thing that can cap it all off is to decap someone.

If only John the Baptist had kept quiet. If he had only kept to his ministry of baptizing people and telling the common folk to live moral lives. If he had kept a low profile he could have

kept his head. However, John -- like everyone else -- heard of the corrupt injustices perpetrated by the powerful Herod, and unlike everyone else, John couldn't keep his mouth shut about it. Few of us want to hear a hard truth when we err, and even fewer of us want to be the ones called to deliver that hard truth to someone else. This is especially true when that hard truth must be spoken to someone with significant power and influence.

In our first lesson today, the same dynamic is at play. There is a boy named Amos who literally describes himself as a farm-boy, and who would much rather remain a farm-boy, but he is sent by God to proclaim a critical word to King Jeroboam. "God set a plumb line for you, it is right there, yet you are building the kingdom of Israel without any concern for that plumb line. Your kingdom is going to fall over." Speaking this hard truth to power gets Amos expelled from the kingdom. Speaking a hard truth to power gets John the Baptist beheaded.

God's prophets are ordinary people called to deliver an extraordinary message. Often the term prophet is used to describe someone who tells the future. That is not really what a prophet in the Bible does, though. Biblical prophets are the ones called by God to speak the hard truths, especially to the people in power. Like Amos, who openly admits his humble background, we are sent from worship each week to proclaim God's in-breaking reign to all the powers that profess to rule this world. That calling -- that we as the Church are a prophetic voice to the powers -- can be intimidating and it can be scary. We know that there are countless powers out there that seek to influence and to control how this world operates. So when we speak to God's love to all people and God's desire for justice for the oppressed, we are sticking our neck out, and that is scary because we know where that got John.

I said at the start of this sermon that today's story is not the normal "good news" we are accustomed to hearing. This story's culmination is likely the most grim one we will encounter in a worship service outside of Good Friday. Yet, in that narrative, God ultimately prevails. That leads us to the good news of today's lesson. This lesson is a stark reminder that this world and the powers in it are corrupt, sinful, and broken. This world is in need of redemption, and the good news is that God offers that redemption.

I am looking forward to singing our next hymn, *Sometimes Our Only Song is Weeping*, and I hope you will pay attention to its words. The first verse is about how fear, weeping, and death can seem ever-present at times. When you and I consider our call to be a prophetic voice to the powers in this world, we might hesitate. Okay, we *will* hesitate. We are only human, and the presence of fear can keep us from being a prophetic voice. The hymn continues in the second verse: “Sometimes we catch the faintest humming, a far-off tune our hearts know well. Sometimes we sense the Spirit coming. Our song returns; our voices swell. “The Spirit sings though we are shaken, and Christ has shared our heartfelt cries. Restored, our weary souls awaken to join God’s song that never dies.”

Yes, John the Baptist met his end, but God’s song never dies. Think of this: the integrity of John’s witness outshines all of Herod’s corrupt actions. As powerful as Herod was, most people never think of him. Yet John’s proclamation continues to be heard. Even Herod himself was drawn to John’s preaching, and in the end it is Herod who is portrayed as the most tragic character. An anonymous source says this, “Like Herod, we are each challenged to really listen to the challenging voice of God in our day and age, and to turn away from the lures and temptations that attempt to seduce us away from fidelity to God.” God calls you and me. God calls us to speak through us words of peace, words of love, and words of faithfulness that challenge the world’s violence, hatred, and treachery. This world needs redemption, and God will not fail in delivering it.

Amen.