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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10)
July 11, 2021

Lectionary Year B: Mark 6:14-29

John the Baptist had been arrested and put in prison by the time his name comes up again in Chapter 6 of Mark's Gospel. One could argue that the scene depicted in today's reading is the most bizarre in all of Sacred Scripture. Who goes to a party and asks for a guy's head on a platter? Clearly, anyone who laments the moral deterioration of today's world isn't aware of how bad things were centuries (and millennia) ago.

There's a twist in all of this, though. Herod doesn't appear as one-dimensional as he would've seemed on the outside, thanks in part to Mark's omniscient perspective. We find out that "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him" (6:20). Thus, we see a tragic element in the Herod narrative; he compromises his own principles and he does things that he'd rather not do...or have to do.

Nowhere is this more evident than when his daughter enters the room and requests John the Baptist's head on a platter. Mark records, plainly, "The king was deeply grieved" (6:26a).

The foreshadowing is obvious. Herod's struggles anticipate those of Pontius Pilate when the crowd called for Jesus to be crucified. Neither wanted to do what was demanded of them, but they capitulated to the wishes of others nonetheless. These aren't exactly profiles in courage...

Let's think about this a bit. The real flaw in human character, whether in 30 A.D. or 2021 A.D., is cowardice. And cowardice rears its ugly head when people value being liked more than they value being good. So they'll do whatever they can not to offend anyone, not to challenge anyone, and not to bother anyone with the facts. Compounding such matters nowadays are the numerous media outlets designed to indulge our confirmation bias. Confirmation bias, which all of us have to varying extents, seeks information and a particular "take" on information that reinforces that which we already believe to be true.

Comforting as that might be, I don't see how any of that will equip us to face the future. How will citizens avoid repeating horrific mistakes of the past when they are unable to distinguish truth from falsehood? It takes a special kind of coward -- with an utter lack of character -- to seize upon this mass confusion and offer the masses everything they want and nothing of what they need.

And here it is -- the art of cowardice. You tell people what they want to hear (not what they need) even if you know better! Unfortunately, that doesn't always work when leadership is needed. For those of you who've hired people at your place of work, allow me to give you this example: You've interviewed a number of candidates, and you decide to hire the person who told you what you wanted to hear and looked good in a suit, even though there were candidates who were better qualified. Should you really be surprised to find out that, at the eleventh hour, the suit is empty?

So, when we look back at Herod, we find that he's the empty suit. There is no principle, no integrity, and no leadership. Even if it means giving someone John the Baptist's head on a platter, it's okay because that's what the person wanted.

Anyone in a position of leadership must seek respect first and popularity second (or third or fourth or maybe even fifth). If all you want to be is liked, you most certainly won't be respected! People like Herod and Pontius Pilate will go down in history as villains not strictly because of their brutality, but because of their lack of integrity.

A great book from many years ago is Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil by Hannah Arendt. If any of you remember the trial of Nazi officer Adolf Eichmann in 1961, you'll recall that regardless of the evidence or testimony of the atrocities committed by the Nazis, including Eichmann, there's no acceptance of responsibility. Eichmann uses the "just following orders" excuse over and over again. Hannah Arendt thus concludes that the evil (in this case, of killing six million Jews) was "banal," which is another way of saying "unremarkable," "ordinary," or "everyday." It was so unremarkable, ordinary, and everyday that it became acceptable.

While we can, perhaps, make allowances for ancient requests for heads on platters, we can't delude ourselves into thinking that we've become so much more advanced as a society that none of us would consider something remotely similar. Anytime I see bloodthirsty demands for "justice," which today would mean execution, I

wonder if that's just a less messy request for someone's head on a platter. Thus, execution isn't necessarily good; rather, it simply activates something in the brain that gives people satisfaction.

Thankfully, there are times when people act according to principle and integrity instead of kneejerk populist impulses. As someone with training in public health, I watched with great interest -- and occasional sympathy -- the Governor of Indiana and our state health department navigate their way through the Covid-19 pandemic. As I have said elsewhere, our state, in terms of both leadership and organization, offered a commendable response to the crisis, part of which I experienced personally. I took part in the drive-up testing, and when I was made aware that I had tested positive back in November, I was promptly phoned by a contact tracer (who happened also to be an Episcopalian) and gave him a detailed account of everywhere I'd been and everyone I'd encountered over the previous fourteen days. (Google Timeline helped a lot there!) When the New Year rolled around and I started hearing rumblings of a vaccine becoming available, I called the Kosciusko County Health Department on a Friday in February and was told to come in the following Monday for my first shot. I would note, too, that the service at the Health Department was prompt, efficient, and courteous.

In short, I would say that, from the response to the crisis, to the Covid testing, to the contact tracing, and onward to the vaccine rollout, we Hoosiers (I think I can say that now) had an op-

portunity to witness leadership that sought what was right, just, and good -- albeit not always popular. It may have been, for example, more popular to put more people at risk of illness or death throughout the crisis, but it wouldn't have been right, just, or good.

And, as Christians, if we're looking for the opposite of someone who panders for popularity, we can look to Jesus Christ, who put God's justice above human justice (or perversions thereof). He looked to outcasts and sinners and gave them dignity. And virtually nothing he did endeared him to the powers-that-be.

So he was put to death.

Now I'm not asking you to die in the name of principle, integrity, or leadership; indeed, it would be sacrilegious to think that any of us should duplicate the sacrifice of Christ. But I will ask you to hand your cowardice, your desire for popularity, and any impulse to "just follow orders" over to the Lord. He died for those very things. And, knowing that, you can be freed from the bonds of these deficiencies of character.

Yes, Christ can transform us into people of courage and integrity. From my previous life in the ELCA, I can recall the witness of our favorite sixteenth-century Reformer, Martin Luther. While Brother Martin was by no means perfect, he was able to withstand threats to his life and challenges to his belief that few could imagine. His appearance before the emperor at the Diet of Worms in 1521 offered him the opportunity to recant what he had written and said

(and presumably grant him safety and tranquility), but he would hear of no such thing.

Instead, he took the much more dangerous route of remaining steadfast. He said: "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason -- I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other -- my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."

You'd have a hard time convincing me that these are the words of a gladhanding politician, because they aren't. They're the words of a firmly grounded Christian, a Christian so transformed by Christ that the only option is to act and speak courageously and truthfully. You see, it's not enough to simply give people what they want, because after a while, they'll realize that there's nothing inside of you, and they'll be able to project upon you whatever whims or desires they want.

And that's not a good place to be...

A better place to be is with Christ, who gives us the alternative to whims and desires. We can anchor ourselves in him and know that the Herods and the Pilates are but reminders of the old selves we once were. By his example, we can have the courage to do the right thing even if it isn't the popular thing...and he and a great big band of Christians (including Martin Luther) from generations past will be there to encourage and support us.

No, we are not stuck in any rut of cowardice, desire for popularity, or impulse to "just follow orders." We are not Herod, grieving because we're doing something we know we shouldn't do. Rather, we are Christians, transformed by the blood of Christ to act and speak courageously and truthfully. Popularity means nothing when your Lord calls you to do what is right.

Amen.