

Practical Hope for Life Today – Mark 6:14-29 and Ephesians 1:3-14
Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on July 11, 2021

Last Sunday, I stopped at the grocery store on my way home from church. This means that I was also still wearing my church clothes, including the collar. Choosing the zippiest checkout lane, I found myself in a line with a cashier I'd never met. She wasn't new, by any means. She was waving at people who called out her to her, talking across lanes with other cashiers, directing the grocery bagger on how to help a customer with propane, and welcomed me to the party with a warm, "Hi honey, how are you?" As she handed me the receipt, she held onto it for a few seconds, leaned way over and quietly asked, "Are you a priest?" "A pastor," I replied. "Will you pray for me?" "Yes," I said as I started looking for her name tag to commit it to memory. She held up her name badge and told me her name. I repeated her name and told her again that I would pray for her. She thanked me and I went on my way. From entering her line to the prayer request couldn't have been more than five minutes – a short, sincere, and significant scene.

Our Bible story today is a scene of a different kind. The gospel writer teased us in the first chapter with half a verse about John the Baptist's arrest and in the third chapter with the Pharisees conspiring against Jesus with Herod's followers, but waited until the sixth chapter to expand on the story.¹ It's the full meal deal with John's head served as the final course of the banquet at Herod's party.² Gruesome and horrific, it's like a scene in a movie that spotlights just how evil the evil ones can be. Herod had heard about Jesus and his apostles proclaiming repentance, casting out demons, and curing the sick among the villages. When he heard about it, Herod was haunted by the idea that John, whom he beheaded, had been raised. Initially, Herod imprisoned John to protect him from his wife Herodias' grudge. He liked listening to John's perplexing teachings and confined him to a handy dungeon. But Herodias won the long game and trapped Herod in his oath-keeping and in his concern for what other people thought about him.

¹ Mark 1:14 and Mark 3:6

² Karoline Lewis, Professor of Biblical Preaching, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. Sermon Brainwave: Commentary discussion of Mark 6:14-29 for July 11, 2021. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/792-7th-sunday-after-pentecost-ord-15b-july-11-2021>

Herod was “deeply grieved,” but apparently not grieved enough to do the right thing.

Herod executed John to save face and protect his power. His evil act haunted him when he heard about the things that Jesus and his apostles were doing, once again connecting John the Baptist’s and Jesus’ ministries. At first, Herod’s deep regret stood out in this gruesome tale as something we can all relate to – even if we haven’t chopped off anyone’s head. But then, Jesus’ apostles and John’s disciples became more compelling. What were they doing around the edges of Herod’s evil acts? Mark, the gospel writer, bookends Herod’s story by first highlighting Jesus’ apostles preaching repentance, casting out demons, and curing the sick; and afterwards, recounting how “the apostles gathered around Jesus to tell him all that they had done and taught” before they got down to Feeding the Five Thousand.³ Mark concludes John’s murder with a short note about his own disciples’ compassion and action. “When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his [beheaded] body, and laid it in a tomb.” Not only does laying John in a tomb further connect his ministry and its end to Jesus’ earthly ministry and its end, but John’s disciples and Jesus’ apostles are examples of people practicing hope in the face of institutional evil and corrupt power.

Last week, I was in a meeting in which the opening icebreaker was to share a sentence or two about where we see signs of hope in a violent world. As you might imagine, the answers were all over the board, but there was a unifying theme that could be described as the hopeful behavior that we see other people doing and that we ourselves try to do - people creating hope for themselves and others by working with other people creating hope for themselves and others. Not spinning illusory hope for someday but working towards practical hope for today. Working repentance and healing for abundant life for everyone. And this takes us to the Ephesians Bible reading.

This reading starts the first of seven weeks in Ephesians, so it’s a good time to read this very short book attributed to Paul, although more likely written by one of his students. Ephesus was located in what’s now the western coast of Turkey. The letter’s message praises God’s work in Jesus, freeing us from sin by grace

³ Mark 6:30 immediately follows the gospel reading of Mark 6:14-29

through faith that creates us for good works. In these opening verses of the first chapter that were read today, we hear about the spiritual blessings in Christ. Included in the list of blessings is redemption in Christ. Redemption in Biblical times meant the equivalent of being freed from slavery.⁴ Redemption from sin would mean being freed from sin. Now obviously, Jesus followers have as much problem with sin as anyone else. But redemption in Christ also gives us a faith community through our baptisms and through whom we experience the weekly and even daily call to surrender our sin at the foot of the cross and practice faith, hope, and love as adopted children of God through Jesus Christ.

It's taken me more than my fair share of time to figure out that being adopted as a child of God through baptism has nothing to do with playing it safe. In fact, being named child of God in baptism draws us into acts of practical hope for today that often *don't* align with the goals of leaders who hold institutional power. Was John the Baptist safe? No. Was Jesus safe? No. Were Jesus' early followers safe? No. Are we safe? No, I'm afraid not. What we are is redeemed and freed by the gospel into the work of practical hope assigned by Jesus.

The cashier who asked for prayer sees Jesus people as a sign of practical hope. Each day our baptism works in us the practical hope of dying to sin and raising us to new life so that we're less like Herod and more like Jesus. Living into a life that is ever more Christ-shaped as a Jesus follower, safety from corrupt power fades to black while acts of practical hope take center stage in public acts of the faithful. Advocacy is one way to do the work of practical hope; community organizing is another. Working through legislation and ballot initiatives that change people's real lives now. It's partly why Augustana has a fledgling Human Dignity Delegate ministry to learn about and address issues of human dignity in the public square. The next meeting is August 1. Let me know if you'd like more details.

In a moment we'll sing "Listen, God is Calling." In the language of Herod's story, God calls us from our self-absorbed, death-dealing sin. God redeems us into freedom from those very sins and our inevitable regret for them. God's call through the cross of Christ empowers us by the Holy Spirit into the unsafe, bold,

⁴ Lutheran Study Bible (NRSV). Ephesians 1:7 study note. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 1922.

and practical hope on behalf of the gospel for the sake of the world. It's a good day to be reminded of this good news. Amen.

Listen, God is Calling [Neno lake Mungu]⁵

#513 Evangelical Lutheran Worship (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006)

Refrain

Listen, listen, God is calling through the Word inviting, offering forgiveness, comfort and joy. (repeat)

Jesus gave his mandate; share the good news that he came to save us and set us free. [Refrain]

Let none be forgotten throughout the world. In the triune name of God go and baptize. [Refrain]

Help us to be faithful, standing steadfast, walking in your precepts, led by your Word. [Refrain]

⁵ Austin Lovelace and Howard S. Olson (1968). Lutheran Theological College, Makumira, Tanzania, admin. Augsburg Fortress.