Sermon copyright © 2018 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Pentecost 10B
Peace, Seattle
July 15, 2018
Mark 6:14-29

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

- He's demonstrated his power to heal, and his authority to forgive sins.
- He's gathered a community of disciples to follow him on the Way.
- He's faced off with the powers of darkness and skirmished with the guardians of tradition.
- He's calmed seas and fed multitudes, and the swelling crowds around him have begun to capture the attention of the powers-that-be.

And now, in this morning's text, Mark pauses in his narrative of Jesus to share in detail the fate of John the Baptist and of what happens when arrogant kings feel threatened by truth-telling prophets.[1]

Israel had a long history of prophetic ministry that recognized the necessity of having a someone on the inside whose official role was telling the truth to the king instead of being one more sycophantic YES MAN.

Think of the prophet Samuel, who anointed first Saul and then David, and who pioneered the role. Or later, the prophet Nathan—whom we'll meet in coming weeks as our First Readings continue telling the story of King David.

Isaiah is another example, a court prophet who served the kings of Judah in Jerusalem, warning both them and neighboring nations that God would not sit idly by while idolatrous practices broke faith with the covenant and unjust policies institutionalized the gap between rich and poor; between the land-rich and the land-less.

But not all the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures were inside-the-beltway types—some were visionary outsiders like Elijah, Elisha, Amos and Micah. Called by God to operate outside of the bounds of the institution, often at great personal cost, they embodied in their very persons the message they were called to proclaim.

John the Baptist was a prophet in this mold, a wilderness trained ascetic whose eyes pierced the soul's marrow and whose booming voice summoned charlatan and believer alike to turn their lives around.

According to Mark, John got on the wrong side of Herod Antipas when he criticized Herod for marrying Herodias, his brother Philip's former spouse. While Herod seemed to have had a certain fearful respect for the Baptist as a holy man, it was not enough to outweigh his desire for peace in his household.

So when Herodias complained for the umpteenth time that John's preaching was making a mockery both of herself and Herod, he had John arrested and put in prison.

Thus Mark let's us know—as he will throughout his gospel—that evil is found not only in the demonic forces Jesus confronts, but in the centers of power, both political and religious, as well.[2]

This, then, is the frame with which we are to hear this sordid tale this morning.

[1] Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus.* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988)
[2] Cheryl Bridges Johns, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B Volume 3, p. 239.

Sermon copyright © 2018 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

And so while today's R-rated story tells in riveting and horrifying detail the fate met by John, it doubles as a prelude to the trial Jesus himself will later endure at the hands of religious and state leaders who feel threatened by his power and his message.

To put it in contemporary terms, as a D.C. lobbyist once opined:

"There are only two engines that drive Washington: One is greed, and the other is fear."

And that's not a bad description of what took place at Herod's birthday party.[3]

The larger point, then, is this: "The political destiny of those who proclaim repentance and a new order"—whether their name is John or Jesus, Ghandi, Malcolm or Martin—"is always the same."[4]

Mark embeds this story betwixt and between the bookends of the disciples' first successful mission. Why? Perhaps to caution his audience (this morning that's us) that we need to be realistic about the cost of discipleship and the depth of resistance that inevitably confronts those who attempt to change the status quo.[5]

In his book, The Cost of Discipleship, written during the rise of the Third Reich, German pastor and eventual martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace" the "mortal enemy of our church."[6]

Cheap grace, he writes, "means forgiveness of sins as a general truth" and "God's love as merely a Christian idea of God." He goes on,

> "The world finds in this church a cheap cover-up for its sins, for which it shows no remorse and from which it has even less desire to be set free. Cheap grace is, thus, denial of God's living word, denial of the incarnation of the word of God."[7]

Costly grace, on the other hand, "is the costly pearl, for whose price the merchant sells all that he has; it is Christ's sovereignty, for the sake of which you tear out an eye if it causes you to stumble…[it is] the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which has to be asked for, the door at which one has to knock…It is costly, because it costs people their lives; it is grace, because it thereby makes them live…above all," writes Bonhoeffer, "grace is costly because it was costly to God, because it costs God the life of God's Son…and because nothing can be cheap to us which is costly to God."[8]

Today we learn what such costly grace cost John the Baptist, and as Mark's story continues, we'll hear more and more about what it will cost Jesus and any who chose to follow in his way.

And what of our context?
We live in an age that seems more and more devoid of any moral compass.

The vision being cast by our most prominent public leaders calls forth not our "better angels," but rather our most self-serving instincts and our most hateful, exclusive, and fear mongering rhetoric.

How do we, as people of faith, walk a path between extremes?
How do we ground ourselves in such a time as this?

---

[3] C. Clifton Black, citing a Washington Post editorial, writing in WorkingPreacher.org. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2503
[4] Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus.* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988) p. 216.
[5] Ibid.
[6] p. 43
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid, p. 44, 45. Emphasis mine.

Sermon copyright © 2018 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

I want to close with a rather lengthy quotation from Wes Granberg-Michaelson, who speaks of the path that links the best experiences of our faith tradition with the actions we take the public realm—what he calls the shared journey of mysticism and politics. He writes:

> "Transformative change in politics depends so much on having a clear view of the desired end. Where does that vision come from? Possibilities may be offered by various ideologies, or party platforms, or political candidates. But, for the person of faith, that vision finds its roots in God's intended and preferred future for the world.
>
> "It comes not as a dogmatic blueprint but as an experiential encounter with God's love, flowing like a river from God's throne, nourishing trees with leaves for the healing of the nations. (Rev. 22:1-2)
>
> "This biblically infused vision, resonant from Genesis to Revelation, pictures a world made whole, with people living in a beloved community, where no one is despised or forgotten, peace reigns, and the goodness of God's creation is treasured and protected as a gift.
>
> "Such a vision strikes the political pragmatist as idyllic, unrealistic, and irrelevant.
> But the person of faith, whose inward journey opens his or her life to the explosive love of God, knows that this vision is the most real of all. It is a glimpse of creation's purpose and a glimmering of the Spirit's movement amid the world's present pain, brokenness, and despair.
>
> "This vision also recognizes the inevitable journey of inward and outward transformation—the simultaneous, continuing transformation of the inward hearts of people liberated by God's astonishing grace and the outward transformation of social and economic structures liberated by God's standards of justice.
>
> "So, for the Christian, politics entails an inevitable spiritual journey. But this is not the privatized expression of belief which keeps faith in Jesus contained in an individualized bubble and protects us from the "world."…Rather, it is a spiritual journey which connects us intrinsically to the presence of God, whose love yearns to save and transform the world…
>
> He concludes:
> "The necessary detachment from this ugly and injurious present political climate depends upon our inner attachment to the mystery of God's unbounded grace and divine, creative love.
> That is the foundation from which we can witness to truth, nurture community, and build essential bonds of solidarity with those who suffer. More than ever, politics which offers redemptive hope will begin with mysticism."[9]

Sisters and brothers, the first step on our mystic journey of redemptive hope begins today at this Table. For here Christ meets us with costly grace, and offers himself, crucified and risen, for our sake and for the sake of the world.

As we take in his life, as we are nourished by his body and his blood, that costly grace becomes part of us both spiritually and physically. And we, in turn, share it, bear it, learn it, live it, embody it—Christ's costly grace—for the sake of the world God so loves. Amen.

[9] Excerpt from Wes Granberg-Michaelson, *"From Mysticism to Politics," "Politics and Religion,"* Oneing, vol. 5 no. 2 (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2017), 17, 21.