

Presbyterian Church of the Covenant
July 12, 2015

TEXTS: Psalm 24; Mark 6:7-29

A Head's Up for Transition

You know, there are just some unwritten rules for how to make a first impression. For example, the one about never ordering French onion soup on a first date. Why set yourself up for disaster? The same goes for first sermon material. I confess the lectionary had been kind to me. For my last Sunday at the church in Havre de Grace, MD, the lectionary served me Simeon saying "Now let thy servant depart in peace". On my first Sunday as interim at the church in Dover, I was served manna in the wilderness, surprising strength for the unknown journey ahead. But then- on my first Sunday as interim at West Presbyterian, my lectionary luck ran out, and what was I served, but John the Baptist's head on a platter! I confess having that flashback when I looked at the texts for today. And I confess the temptation to feed on other Scripture options instead. But I hung in there, and hope you will too, as we hear God's word from Mark's gospel. Allow me to back up into last week's text a bit, to give us a springboard to help make sense of it all.

(READ MARK 6: 7-29)

So – there it is. More soap opera than scripture-like, and definitely not for the squeamish. And it begs some questions, to be sure. Why did Herod do it? Why include it in the gospel about Jesus? And really, why there – why, in the middle of the mission of Jesus' disciples do we have the execution of John the Baptist? Luke tells of it too, but puts it with the rest of the John the Baptist material, and keeps it to a simple death notice – no distracting detour through Herod's flashback to the birthday party gone terribly wrong. Frankly, Luke makes much more sense. But

it occurs to me that Mark wasn't so much trying to make sense, as he was trying to make a point. It's pretty much his only point, made again and again throughout his gospel for the sake of his faith community – and it is this: discipleship is risky business. Being sent out in Jesus' name to do Jesus' work can lead us to “shake the dust off our heels” disappointment, or even worse. That when the proclamation of the faithful and the powers that be intersect, the result can be conflict and take the shape of a cross. John the Baptist encountered Herod. Jesus encountered Pilate. And disciples who do what disciples should do will have their encounters with the powers that be, too.

So it seems to me that by putting this story where he does, Mark is giving his hearers then, and his hearers now, a head's up, so to speak. Conflict and consequences are a part of the journey. Being a follower of Jesus doesn't remove all obstacles, disappointments, challenges or conflicts. You know this. You have lived this. Sometimes the life of faith, the ministry of the church will have times of effectiveness, where healing happens, lives are changed, things work, seeds planted grow. Sent out by Jesus the disciples cast out demons and healed the sick. In other words, they changed people, they changed things – it was working! And while that kind of change is good news if you're the sick person, there are larger forces, bigger systems, the powers that be, that by nature resist change and react to it. The powers that be don't much like the word “repent”, which means to turn around, turn away, change course. It was John the Baptist's word, his truth, his challenge that put a damper on Herod's party of a life. How will the church, how will disciples today speak to the powers that be, who live a party life at others' expense? If we will, we may have times of bumping into conflict. And those bumps can bruise.

The story is told about a missionary who spent every day down on the banks of the rivers, bandaging the wounded who came to her. She was able to offer them compassion, heal their hurts, give them comfort. But finally one day, she knew she had to head upstream to find out who was hurting the people, and she set up camp there, determined to stop them. The church is called to do both – to tend the wounded, to console, comfort, heal – and to confront wounding to change its ways. It is the call and challenge you've undertaken with EDGE Ministries--- not only to care for the needs of those in Edgemoor Gardens, but to stand with them to challenge the systems that make their lives anything but a party. Challenging the irresponsible landlords is a start, but the systems that keep the poor poor are much bigger than that. It is upstream ministry. And Mark says "Head's Up" – be prepared that such ministry will challenge the powers wherever they may be – in here or out there – and will have consequences.

"Head's Up", too, says Mark. In times of transition, which is where you are, be aware that people will make assumptions. Herod was quick to make an assumption when he heard about Jesus – that he must be John the Baptist, back from the dead. No doubt a guilty conscience at work, but I think it's more than that. Herod made a judgement, a decision, based on what had happened before. That past was the lens through which he viewed the future. And while the past is a good reminder, it is not meant to be a rerun. Churches that are thriving – even surviving, which is hardly a given these days for the church – those churches are not trying to "just get back to the way things were". Because, while "the way things were" may have been when church and life felt best to you --- that is not going to make you a church with a mission, but a church that is a museum. So head's up – be careful about assumptions about who you are

as a church these days --- whether those assumptions come from out there or in here. Keep the past where it belongs. Be open to new possibilities, new people, new ways of being church in this changing world.

And lastly, “Head’s up”, says Mark. Times of transition are times of decision. And this season of your life places you at intersection places, and will call for many decisions. It is a time of self-evaluation, for assessing honestly where you are, truthfully who you are, realistically how you’ll move on. It’s a time to decide what your priorities will be, how you will interpret yourselves, what things you will let go of, what new things you will embrace. It is the very stuff of which your Congregational Listening Team’s “Let’s Talk” sessions are made. We need your voice in order to then make decisions that will shape your future. “Head’s up” says Mark – remember that decisions can be dangerous. People make decisions in different ways, with different motives. Some are impulsive, like Herod, speaking without thinking, trying to impress and then in over their heads. Others, like Herod’s wife, can be more calculating, harboring a grudge or hiding an agenda. Some, like her daughter, get sucked in as players in other people’s issues. And still others will be victims, whose roles get cut out. “Head’s up”, church in transition- be aware of your agendas, be fair about others’ place at the table. Let’s talk and let’s listen.

There’s a method for Bible Study and preaching preparation that asks of the text “Where’s the good news?”. I confess that my first reaction to this text from Mark was “good question”. Betrayal, beheading, the schemes of those in power protecting their self interest. But the good news came – from, of all places, the Book of Order. The very first words, the very first claim – “All power in heaven and on earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who

raised Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in that which is to come. God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ HEAD OF THE CHURCH, which is his body". Jesus Christ is head of the church. We are the body of Christ. Believing it, let us be living it – rejoicing that no matter what happens, what changes, challenges or consequences we face, that is a truth and a tie which nothing and no one can sever. Thanks be to God!