

Sermon Delivered at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House
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Readings and Bulletin: www.raybagnuolo.com/sermons.htm

Sermon Notes: These are my unedited notes.
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We are all part of the rising tide...
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Last week, we were talking about “by whose authority Jesus did the things he did. Remember, it was the passage about a prophet is never welcomed in his home town? It was also the reading about when you find yourself unwelcome – move on. Shake the dust from your sandals.

Well. Mark continues this week, laying out some of the politics and conditions that existed in Galilee at the time of Jesus’ ministry. Mark immerses us in this politics the rulers named Herod. There were two.

In this case, we are in the time of Herod Antipas, or simply Herod, who was appointed by his father Herod the Great, who ruled for nearly 40 years, dying in 4 BCE.

Herod the Great’s reign reads like a movie of intrigue, politics, violence, wars, executions, plots of assassination, and even his execution of his beloved wife Mariamme. Later, he would also condemn their two sons Alexander and Aritobulus, who never forgave their father for executing their mother. When the sons were discovered to have plans to avenge her death by poisoning their father – Herod the Great had them tried and put to death. And those are the details of just what he did to his family!

On his deathbed, and with the Romans’ blessing, Herod anointed Herod Antipas, his son by marriage to a Samaritan woman named Malthace. Herod was made a tetrarch (one of the three rulers of the territory under Herod the Great’s control), which was made up of Galilee and Perea.

This appointed son, Herod Antipas, is this Herod who first married to Aretas, the daughter of the neighboring king of Nabatea. He divorced her so that he could marry his niece Herodias, who was at the time married to another uncle of hers. Together they had a daughter – Salome.

This was problematic for Herod. First, he was divorcing a politically arranged marriage with a neighboring nation-king. Second, by law, before Herod could marry Herodias, she had to divorce her husband, who was also her uncle.

Included in all this are the Romans, who controlled all the territory and who enjoyed prosperous relationships with both Herods, including the son, and were willing to help him in any way they could to get what Herod wanted. His father and he had established the highest bonds of friendship with the Romans, so much so that Herod the Great was given two official titles of recognition: “friends of Rome” and “friends of Caesar.”

All this becomes entangled in the new or second testament in two ways: Herod is known as the ruler who was criticized by John the Baptist for his breaking of tradition in his divorce and remarriage, gave in to Herodias’ request through Salome to have John beheaded. He is also known as the Jewish ruler, who along with Pontius Pilate, the Roman Prefect of Judea, questioned and ridiculed Jesus at his trial.

It really would make an amazing movie. It is an historical glance into events in the lives of these rulers and the people of the time that continues to change the course of history, today.

And, in literary style, Mark begins the reading this morning with these words:

King Herod heard of it, 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.” But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

So what follows is a flashback, and Mark retells the story following these words:

But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

And for a few minutes this morning, this is where I want to stay. Rather than go into the story of the beheading of John, I am more interested in Herod’s belief that this Jesus he was hearing about, this Jesus who came home to Galilee in last week’s reading, this Jesus who was becoming known well enough to reach Herod – that Herod was sure this Jesus was John the Baptist, risen in Jesus --- and what would naturally follow --- coming to get him.

You don’t live in this kind of fear, in some ways superstitions, unless you have something to fear. And, if you are in the business of kingdom building and political survival – suspicion and even superstitions can go a long way in holding back the tide. And, if you are in the business of holding back the tide – at some level you know, you just know that the tide will eventually win. You just hope this is not the day. And, in whatever way you can, you try to carve out another day.

So, the question becomes, which are we – are we those who hold back the tide of Christianity, faithfulness, justice, love? Or are we the ones that are part of the relentless

tide that will crest and fall, breaking old resistance and boundaries, clearing away the debris as it recedes, revealing a new place, a clean slate before us with the chance to start anew.

There is a deep yearning in us all for equality, fairness, justice, and yes love. And there is also a deep yearning for security, safety, protecting ourselves, reaching some point where we can relax and enjoy our comfort – even if others “haven’t worked as hard; weren’t as fortunate; or fell upon bad luck; made bad choices; etc.”

Deep inside of us, like Herod seeing the resurrection of John the Baptist in the stories of Jesus, we are sometimes caught in the resurrection of justice and equality in the moments we question our privileged status when confronted with someone or some group of people being oppressed by conditions or agencies.

For many of us, we live in this tension with our eyes wide open. We struggle to enter our own bed at night, knowing someone is sleeping on the street. The goodness of John the Baptist rises to our consciousness in the forms of the goodness of righteousness and justice – and then we have choices, decision, to make about how we enter the tension and how do we live into equality, justice, gospel.

We become presented with choices about our own comfort, control, interests – and those things that we know may upset them. We become a Herod and Pontius Pilate weighing our own interests against the “messiness” of dealing with others and their injustices. We weigh one person or one group of people – against the larger interests of state, church, nation.

It’s why prophets are so troublesome to ruling powers. Prophets see things differently. They don’t see the interests of church, state, or nation as greater than the injustices of the few. In fact, the prophets expect the church, state, nation to address the injustices, use their power, influence, and resources to resolve the injustices – even if means that some abuses occur.

The real reason that prophets are so troublesome is that they challenge the ruling authorities and do not acquiesce simply because they are told to be quiet; told not to perform miracles on the Sabbath; told they are unclean, unwelcome, or any other “unness.”

And they stir things up. Take a look at the Arab uprisings. The struggle in the Sudans. The African nations and their draconian responses to the prophets who call for gender equality. Think of all those who raise their voices for justice and just look at the response they get in return.

And here’s the truth. The closer the prophets and advocates come to changing an unjust situation or condition – the more intense the response. The more they fight back. The more fearful they become of change. The more they will do everything they can to get one more day holding back the tide. Until it is too late...

The resurrection of Jesus, or justice, or love comes crashing down and all things become new. That is the Good News. And the even better Good News is that it can all happen from love. The love for one another, including those holding back the waves, as we extend them a hand to be pulled from the wake and move forward with us into the new way that is ahead.

Herod only knew one way or the other. Either you kill the revolution or it comes back to haunt you and eventually kills you. And many today see the Bible in this way: as a weapon to subdue – rather than an invitation to love.

Eventually love will overcome, but the price is too high in personal violence, pain, destruction to delay. The New Testament is about a path that makes the domination or power, control, discrimination, bigotry, fear...it makes all of those impotent in the face of loving God with all our hearts. Minds and souls. And one another as ourselves.

No wonder it has those who oppose such things concerned about the raising of John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Great Teachers we know.

No wonder it has them concerned. For they should be.

And we should be sure that they know we will love them even after the debris has been cleared, and our path to walk together has come to pass.