

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

July 26, 2009

Proper 10B 2009

In the name of our One living, ever-beckoning God:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our readings from Second Samuel and the Gospel according to Mark, we hear of two celebrations hosted by two different kings. The events are separated by about 1,000 years, but both call us to examine human power and its relationship to God's will. In our first reading, we find King David leading the Ark of the Covenant to the city he had conquered to be the new capitol of Israel. The Ark was the most sacred object in Israelite worship and marked the very physical presence of God amidst God's people. The Ark had led the people through the wilderness to the Promised Land. It had been left with Abinidab during the civil war that preceded David's rise to power.

Now David takes the Ark to the City of David and assembles thousands to form a procession to usher it into Jerusalem. As the Ark came into the new royal capitol, David, clad only in an ephod, dances with all his might before the Ark. He offers sacrifice before it and then hosts a feast for the multitudes in celebration. In his mind, David is acting to capture and ensure the presence and power of God for his reign. Later in this story we will see whether physical possession of the Ark will be sufficient and how well God and kings will get along.

Today's reading from Mark tells of another party thrown by King Herod. It is the story of the death of John the Baptist who preached a baptism of repentance. John was the last of the long line of Old Testament prophets. The heavens had been silent for hundreds of years until John came as God's prophet to Israel. Our account opens with Herod pondering who this Jesus might be. He has heard of Jesus and his healings and deeds of power and of the people's speculations about him. Herod concludes that, "John, whom I beheaded, has come

back to life.”

Mark’s account then goes into a flashback of the story about the death of John. Herod had arrested John because John challenged his legitimacy as ruler over the Israelites. Herod, against Jewish law, had married Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, while his brother was still alive. Herodias plotted to kill John for attacking her legitimacy and character, yet was unable to because Herod knew John to be a holy and righteous man. Herodias’ chance came when her daughter dances for Herod and Herod rashly promises her anything she wants before all the assembled guests. When, prodded by her mother, the daughter demands John’s head, Herod then does what he does not want to do in order to save face and his hold on his coercive power.

What are we to make of these stories and why does Mark tell us this story now, right after Jesus has been rejected in Nazareth and between having sent his disciples out and before their return? In many ways, the story foreshadows Jesus’ own conflicts with the religious and secular rulers of his day, the plotting against his life, and his own violent death. It also tells the truth of discipleship – If you want to be my disciple: take up your cross and follow me!

Mark is doing bold things here. He is living in times of tumultuous change and he looks back at the life of Jesus who knowingly gave his life to preach repentance like John, to preach through his teaching and healings the lesson set forth by the prophet Micah: “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings?...Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression...He has told you, O Mortal, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Repentance in the Bible is about reorienting one’s thinking and living towards what God wants – justice and kindness. Human power, with its vested interests in the status quo which gives them unjust advantages, doesn’t want to hear that and can and will use coercive power to stop it. We have seen it in our own times – the American civil right movement where guns, killings, fire bombing

churches, police dogs and all sorts of violence were used in an attempt to stop it.

Mark is also looking ahead as a disciple of Jesus and sees that while the old powers have fallen, the new power – Rome- is even more unjust and brutal. The only strength his community can rely on is divine power as they confront ever-increasing injustices and cruelties.

What do these texts say to us today? I am seeing much more of the David approach in religion and politics these days than the Micah approach. It often seems that far more religious leaders on TV and in the news are, like David, seeking to claim the benefit of God's power and favor by claiming to move God's presence into houses of their own construction just as David sought to move God into his own new city. One of the great biblical truths is that God wants to pitch God's tent with the people. But it a relationship in which God remains God and still wants to lead, to call us into the future God desires for us. To claim the authority of God and try to drag God into the future we envisage for ourselves doesn't work.

We have to listen and look to see where God is calling us in the present. God doesn't call us to look backwards. We have to see where God is now, in the present moment of our lives, and we have to be willing to follow where God is pointing. Too often the Church tries to keep God locked up in the past where we are more comfortable and the authorities feel more secure.

I also think there is a lot of Herod going on in religious and political circles these days. Who in that story is the weakest person, the least powerful? It turns out to be Herod! The king has claimed power. However, at a boisterous party probably with plenty of wine, following a stimulating dance by his stepdaughter, Herod makes a rash promise – an open invitation to give the stepdaughter whatever she ask. The crowd is all stoked up by the wine, the dance and now the promise. What is she going to ask for and what will the king do? When the request for John's head comes, Herod is clearly in great conflict. His desire to retain his power and privilege in the eyes of the crowd is in conflict with his respect

for John and whatever sense of justice and kindness he may have. He does what he doesn't want to do – to save face and keep power.

I think there is a lot of Herodias in religious and political circles today. When the daughter doesn't know what to ask for and goes to her mother. Herodias sees the crowd's desire and excitement as well as Herod's vulnerable and conflicted position. She seizes the opportunity. She deflects the crowd's passions and offers up a scapegoat – John – to quell their desires and to advance her own agenda. The crowd is fed violence.

Doesn't this perfectly reflect the passion that Jesus will come to face before the High Priest and Pontius Pilot? The wonder of Jesus' death is not its uniqueness but its commonness. I think we honor God more when we recognize that the Son chose to stand with the weak of this world who suffer injustice and debasement at the hands of those in power who ignore God's desire for us to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with their God.

Let us think about John the Baptist and Jesus every time we witness religious leaders or political figures offering up scapegoats to deflect the crowd's passions towards their designs or to protect their positions rather than to do justice and love kindness.

Finally, let us think about Herod and John the Baptist every time someone offers us a scapegoat to satisfy our fears and frustrations rather than do justice and show kindness. Where do we stand? I thought about this recently when I saw a bishop (fortunately not ours) and other religious leaders get a thousand people to go the statehouse in red shirts on the civil unions issue. Why are they, for the most part, are silent about predatory lending practices, 24% credit card interest, continuing cuts in education, and lack of housing?

I read in yesterday's newspaper that our Governor, who belongs to one political party, cutting out of the budget the keiki health insurance program and reducing funds for domestic violence shelters for battered women. I also read that the legislature, controlled by the other political party, voted itself a 32% pay raise as government workers and others are getting the hours cut back or are getting furloughed. Where are the voices of faith on

these issues that directly affect families?

Let us remember that Jesus stood with those that suffer injustice and not those that manipulate power for advantage. Where does the Gospel call us to stand?

Amen.