

Wesley United Methodist Church

July 15, 2018

“Are You There, God? Do You Care, God?”

Mark 6:14-29

There is this delightful little book by David Heller, called, *Dear God: Children’s Letters to God*. There are some wonderful, witty observations. For example,

Dear God, What do you think about all those movies made about you around Easter time? I think they’re kind of corny, myself. Your buddy, Charles (age 9)

Dear God, What do you do with families that don’t have much faith? There’s a family on the next block like that. I don’t want to get them into trouble, so I can’t say who. See you in church. Alexis (age 10)

Dear God, Want to hear a joke? What is red, very long, and you hear it right before you go to sleep? Give up? A sermon. Your friend, Frank (age 11)

Then there is one from a youngster who sees all the misery in the world and wonders: Dear God, I have doubts about you sometimes. Sometimes I really believe. Like when I was four and I hurt my arm and you healed it up fast. But my question is, if you could do this why don’t you stop all the ad in the world? Like war. Like diseases. Like famine. Like drugs. And there are problems in other people’s neighborhoods too. I’ll try to believe more. Ian (age 10)

Is there a young Ian in you? If you are honest, probably. Undoubtedly, there was some Ian in John the Baptist. But more about that as we get into this horrible story. And it IS a horrible story. The foolish murder of a good man whose “crime” was speaking out about immorality in high places.

John the Baptist is a fascinating character. Scripture introduces him before he is even born. His father, Zechariah, a priest in the hill country of Judea, and his mother Elizabeth, also of a priestly family. They had prayed for years for a child. Now suddenly, after almost all hope gone through the passing of time and the ticking of the biological clock, the angel Gabriel meets Zechariah as he is offering incense in the sanctuary: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.”

And he was. Unusual, to say the least. A man of the wilderness dressed in homespun camel’s hair with a wide leather belt around his waist. A diet of locusts and wild honey. (Mark 1:6) Hair and beard uncut, somewhat unkempt. Fierce, burning eyes.

His message was a call to repentance and righteous living before God. His was the voice that the prophet Isaiah said would be crying in the wilderness, saying, “Prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:3-5)

It would be nice to say that the world responded unanimously to John’s call, but we know better. John the Baptist spoke out once too often. His preaching was bold enough to breach the palace walls, falling on the ears of a government that did not want to hear, challenging a sinful king who refuses to be confronted. Herod had him arrested.

A word here about this king. The New Testament speaks of several Herods. The man we met in our lesson was NOT Herod the Great, the one who was king when Jesus was born, the one responsible for the massacre of the baby boys in Bethlehem following the visit of the Wise Men. This man was Herod Antipas, the one of Herod the Great’s sons, one of the lucky ones as it turns out, because Herod the Daddy was totally paranoid, insanely suspicious and near the end of his life became well-known for murdering, not only the innocents in Bethlehem, but his own offspring as well. (Even Caesar in Rome is reported to have said it was safer to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son). Another who survives was Herod Philip, Antipas’ half-brother. Another half-brother was Aristobulus. Aristobulus had a daughter named Herodias. She married Herod Philip. They in turn, had a daughter whose name was Salome. Clear so far?

Now things get sticky and we find a near--eastern version of some steamy soap opera. On a visit to Rome, Herod Antipas met brother Philip’s wife, Herodias, - Aristobulus’ daughter, remember, which meant that Philip had married his own niece. Herodias was a deceitful and ambitious woman who saw in Antipas a ticket to power and influence. So, the two of them deserted Philip and headed back to Galilee. This was OK as far as Roman law was concerned, but not Jewish law, and Galilee was a Jewish land.

Enter John the Baptist. Not one to mince words--he was more than content to call his wilderness congregation a pack of snakes (Matt. 3:7)—he thundered against this incest relationship: “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” Herodias was angry enough to want this wild-eyed prophet dead. But as much as Herod wanted to please his new wife, he begged off this one. As the text says, “For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man,

and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.” (Mark 6:20) Hmm.

Meanwhile, the ministry of John’s cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, was becoming well-known. His fame was spreading—there were stories of incredible crowds and miraculous healings. But here was John sitting in a dungeon. If Jesus were the promised Messiah, as in many ways he appeared to be, why did he not get his cousin out of jail? John got word to some of those who had been faithful followers before his arrest: “Go and ask Jesus, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’” Sounds a bit like young Ian in the letter to God we read earlier.

Jesus sent word back. “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.” (Matt. 11:4-5) Uh-huh. But John still sits in a cell.

Suddenly, Herodias had her chance. Birthday party. All the high hats of town and country are at the palace. Wine, women and song, and plenty of each. Daughter Salome dances. The story says, “she pleased Herod and his guests.” We are left to make of that phrase whatever our fertile imaginations will. Probably half in the bag, Herod says to her, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give you.” The king’s good ol’ boys, by now three sheets in the wind themselves, hear the promise and start laughing and cheering and clapping and yelling “More, More!” Salome does not know what to do. Herod ups the ante: “Whatever you ask me, I will give you; even half of my kingdom.” And the good ol’ boys start laughing, cheering and clapping all the louder.

Salome runs out of the room to find her mother and asks, “What should I ask for?” Bingo! “The head of John the Baptizer.”

So, Salome goes back to Herod. “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” Ever make a promise that you regret? As the text says, “The king was deeply grieved.” But a promise is a promise, and in front of all the guys, at that. We know the rest. The end of today’s scripture grimly reports, “When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.”

Chalk up another victory for evil. There seem to be lots of those, don’t there. Not only back then, but day to day throughout history on down to the present moment. Countless millions have suffered horribly, violently and senselessly. In the name of religion, in the name of racial purity, in the name of greed or lust or anger and often for no reason at all. Evil wins again. One more reason to say with young Ian in his letter, “Dear God, I have doubts about you sometimes.”

Amazing. Mark may have inserted this story for young Ian—and maybe you and me as well when we see so much wrong with this world and start wondering about God. Are you there, God? Do you care, God?

If you want answers to those questions, ask and answer a couple of other questions. First, whom is Mark’s gospel all about? Jesus, of course. As Mark goes through Jesus’ story, does he indicate any difficulties, any stumbling blocks, any apparent victories for the other side, any moments when it appears that evil wins? Certainly. The conflicts with the establishment, the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion, the miserable death. Is that the end of the story? No way, Jose! It ends with the resurrection, and some dumbfounded disciples. Does evil finally win? Certainly not. Now ask those questions again. Are you there, God? Do you care, God?

The story is sad and depressing, but it is surrounded by the ministry of Jesus. Mark’s message in telling it right here and right now is that nothing in this world, not even the palaces of the powerful are beyond the reach and impact of the gospel.

Yes, there are times with young Ian that we wonder about God. It is true there is horrible evil out there. There are evil people—the sociopaths, the mass murders, the vicious child and spouse abusers. There are evil systems in which we all participate—going without food and shelter in a nation of abundance, people not getting medical care because of no other reason than lack of money. There are evils born out of sheer stupidity, like the stupid promise Herod made to Salome.

But the message of our faith says that evil does not have the last word. Listen, Ian, and all who ever wonder about God. Herod does not win. Herodias does not win. Evil does not win! With joy we can shout out that God’s world does not end with a whimper. It ends with the Lamb upon the throne and with the words, “The kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ. And he shall reign forever.” (Rev. 11:15) Amen.