

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Today's gospel passage from Mark is an old story, but a bad fit. Just last Sunday, we heard and considered the verses right before these...about Jesus getting no love in his own hometown. And, next Sunday? We get right back to Mark's chronology of Jesus, heading out to feed the five thousand.

But this? This is like a huge, huge side track. It is not even about Jesus...the only place in Mark's gospel where that occurs. So, like most clergy faced with the lectionary for today, I find this a difficult passage to preach on...and I am not alone.

Matthew and Luke, who were - in one respect - the first preachers to work with Mark's material, also struggle to make sense of how this passage fits into Mark's...and their....larger story of the Gospel. Matthew shortens the story considerably, while Luke omits it altogether...which is what we could do as well. But, here is an idea: why not just tell the story like it is?

Dive right into a descriptive retelling of this somewhat unseemly, and at times grisly, story of political intrigue and manipulation. Pull out our more evocative language and let our imagination run free as we get drawn into this sordid tragedy. Why? Because this story is not all that different from many of the stories we read about or watch on television.

After all, in what way is Herod like a first-century Richard Nixon, so blinded by ambition that he is willing to sacrifice his principles for political gain? Or maybe he seems more like a Don Draper of *Mad Men*, so stuck in a life of deception that he can hardly tell the difference between a pitch and a profession of good faith. Can John the Baptist be like Martin Luther King, Jr. or Oscar Romero, spiritual leaders willing to tell truth to power whatever the costs? How about Herodias...who does she remind you of, either as a TV character or as someone in the news? Maybe Herodias wants to protect herself and her children from John's claims, even if they are true, and have we considered the lengths to which we would go to protect our family from harm? Who says Bible stories are boring? This is the stuff of late night television.

Whatever his motives for the placement, Mark puts this story here for a reason...and it may be because he wants to make a strong impression about two things.

First, the ministry of Jesus, like that of John, has significant political implications...and that is not "political" in the sense of who to vote for. No, I mean that the kingdom Jesus preaches about challenges our desire for the status quo, and our all- too-easy acquiescence with the cultural presumption that might, or wealth, or status, or fame...makes right. Proclaim God's kingdom of mercy and grace and, as with Jesus and his forerunner John, there will be dues to pay. Second, Mark wants us to take seriously that this is, indeed, the way of the world. Those who stand up to City Hall often take a beating, and those

who advocate an alternative to the status quo can usually expect those who benefit from the status quo to come down on them hard. We watch programs like *Mad Men*, *The Newsroom*, *Game of Thrones*, *West Wing*, *The Sopranos*, and the like because we see ourselves in them. We might not always like what we see, but at least it seems real...and Mark is, if nothing else, a realist.

He is writing, after all, in the wake of the devastation caused by the Romans exercising their brutal power by destroying the Jerusalem Temple. So part of why he tells this story is because this is the world as he knows it, the world he lives in and, by extension, the world we live in as well.

Which raises some important questions. I try to preach the gospel by inviting you into it....so, what...then, is the gospel we are called to proclaim?

Sometimes we have to look beyond the passage in question to find the gospel. And in the case of this story, perhaps the most profound note of gospel is that it is not the only story Mark tells. In other words, it is not the whole the story...and it manifestly is not the end of the story.

Is that it? Yeah, actually, it is. This is the way of the world, but it is not the whole story. Because Jesus comes, you see, precisely to show us that there is something more, something beyond the heartache and intrigue and tragedy of Herod, and Don Draper, and Richard Nixon, and ourselves.

Which brings us, I think, to the very heart of the gospel promise. We believe, teach, and confess that Jesus came to make possible for us more than mere survival, more than mere persistence, more even than mere success. Jesus came to help us to imagine that there is more to this life than we can perceive. Jesus came to offer us not just more life, but abundant life. He came so that there could be a better ending to our stories and the story of the world than we can imagine or construct on our own.

And, so....when the Temple has just been destroyed, or your marriage is ending, or you've lost your job, or you fear your child will never speak to you again, or you're pretty sure your friend has betrayed you, or you think you may just have screwed up the one relationship that meant something to you...then the possibility of another ending....a *good* ending....is, indeed, not just good news, but the best news we can imagine.

Again, this is the one scene in all of Mark's Gospel in which Jesus makes no appearance...and I have a hunch that is not by accident. Because apart from God's promises, this is about all we can expectgood intentions gone bad, fearless truth telling rewarded with imprisonment, the triumph of the powerful over the powerless, and so it goes. But as honest as Mark wants to be about the story *of* the world, he wants even more to testify to the story of God's great love *for* the world.

So, it is incumbent upon me...in the sacred rite and vows of ordination...to tell the truth, this week and every week. And, as fellow disciples of Jesus, the Christ, it is also incumbent upon each of you...to do the same.

To tell the truth in the face of the story that the world lives into...unchanged from the days of Herod Antipas and Herodias, with the latest sequel on your screen tonight, brought to you by Time Warner or DirecTV or whoever you pay for the privilege.

We all need to tell the truth of the human predicament that we know and watch and revel in and despair over. But then tell the second truth, the truth of God's loving response to us and our predicament and God's tenacious, never ceasing effort to redeem us by writing us...and writing us into...a better story than we deserve or can imagine.

Telling both truths, in the company of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.