“Opportunity Knocks”

II Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

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7th After Pentecost

This morning’s Gospel lesson is a bit of a conundrum. It is the one story in Mark’s Gospel in which Jesus does NOT appear. Not at all. It seems to occur as a sort of “meanwhile, back at the ranch” kind of moment. You know, when the hero is off doing something and there’s a piece the writer inserts for the reader or viewer’s information.

In the previous episode Jesus has sent out his disciples to carry on ministry, and he’s sent them “with authority” and, by golly, they do it! They preach repentance, calling folk back to live as God intends. They defeat evil; and they heal. Wow. Great stuff!

But not so great if you’re a ruler who has some authority – though clearly not as much as he’d like – under the Roman superpower. Anyone who gains a following is a potential threat so you head them off as best you can. Sheer self-protection; common sense. Which is what Herod Antipas
(not the “Great,” but his son) has done with John the Baptist. Herod is not, really a “king” at all. One commentator says that title could only be used as a courtesy. And John had become an apparent threat not only with what he was saying to folk but with the fact that he’d gained a following. To silence him, Herod has put him in prison. Which, as we know, does not necessarily accomplish the purpose, but what else can a would-be king do.

Now another preacher with, apparently, another following. And folk haven’t figured out just who this might be! Possibilities are mentioned. So let’s listen now to what today’s Gospel lesson tells us.

I begin with the last couple of sentences from the previous story:

[Read Mark 6:12 – 29]

You’ve heard the story before; perhaps at the opera or theatre. Certainly you’ve heard references to it – John’s “head on a platter,” or the “dance of the seven veils” (which, clearly, is more than a bit of embellishment to the scripture text). The actual source of the account is not known; scholars think that it may have circulated as oral tradition
familiar to the writer of Mark. It appears in manuscripts only here and in Matthew, where it is a bit shorter.

Herod Antipas had married his brother’s ex-wife, against the Mosaic Law. Not a good idea for a leader whose power is already quite fragile to publicly violate that law. John the Baptist has pointed this out, evidently forcefully; and the wife does not like that. However, she has no formal power and Herod apparently is not of a mind to do anything more than imprison John. He’s both fearful of John and fascinated by John. Herod “liked to listen to him.”

But, “an opportunity came.” Yes! Opportunity knocks and Herodias, the wife, sees it and seizes it! Now’s her chance; she won’t blow it. And Herod is trapped by his ego, by his insecurity, by both his power and weakness, by his foolishness. “You promised!” Publicly. Openly. Perhaps drunkenly. He has given his word. No choice now. Do it.

So John’s head is delivered on a platter. And John’s disciples claim the body for burial.

That’s the story. Not about Jesus as all. So what might it have to do with the Gospel? With us?
We certainly know about feeling trapped! About being caught in our own wrong doing. It is not all that unusual for any of us, I suspect, to have known the right, the good, the true and yet to have gone in other directions for whatever reasons. It happens. “My bad.”

And we are fascinated, as well as fearful, by those whose testimony or lives call us to account. The ones who shine the light on us, as it were, exposing our weaknesses or wrongdoing. Sometimes we’re just plain angry, mad at the truth-teller, and lash out. Sometimes we just hope it will all go away. But it usually doesn’t, so sometimes we, too, look for the right opportunity to gain the upper hand and silence that voice.

Opportunities knock. And who can resist? All kinds of opportunities. The ones to get some sort of revenge or satisfaction. But also the opportunities to do well, to do good, to be kind, to care about and for the other, to forego what seems to be our pleasure or comfort so that others may know some sort of integrity or wholeness.

And, yes, I know, as do you, that the opportunities are not always presented with astounding clarity; I know that my life is filled with competing goods, with choices between or
among the not-all-good and not-all-bad. And often I just don’t know what the consequences will be; how far they will reach.

Perhaps, then, instead of nodding to this text as an out-of-date legend brought to mind by lectionaries and grand opera, just one more story in which the woman is portrayed as the scheming doer of evil and the man her foolish accomplice, we might hear it as an admittedly gruesome, brutal reminder of the depth and the power of evil in our world and in our lives.

There are, in our time and our world, actual beheadings in terror-dominated confrontations.

There are, in our time and our world, mammoth and cruel episodes of violence perpetrated by movements, by angry and fearful men and women in many lands, including our own. Often not “intentional,” we hear; they “just happen.”

We read of a respected professional organization compromised by the agreement on the part of some of its leaders to bend long-held convictions and values respecting all persons in order to serve the perceived needs of the nation or of its government, so acquiescing to practices
which themselves deny the values of that nation supposedly being preserved and honored.

We know of wrongs which are truly not “violent” in any physical sense. Indeed, they might bring some sort of pleasure and yet deny the fullness or even the possibility of life to others, to creation, to ourselves. We know we often don’t see that or, if we do, we quickly turn our eyes and minds in other directions.

We know our own inability to create the fully good, right, true.

We know the power of sin and of evil, often systemic and deeply rooted so that it’s not only hard to identify, but seemingly impossible to address. So we let our helplessness be our excuse. It does seem to me that the racism so deeply ingrained in our culture and in ourselves, often beyond our own understanding or control, is of that character.

And here is this story, a third of the way through Mark’s account which he says is “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”
Hah! Good news? Where is there any? And what is that good news?

The good news – Jesus’ disciples are out and about telling of God’s love and, by the power of the Spirit and the authority of Jesus, accomplishing the very transformation of lives!

The good news – John may have been silenced, but his message was not! We, too, and all God’s children, are called to “repent,” to turn around from the ways which lead to death – our own destruction, the deaths of others, the death of creation itself. Yes, even when it seems what one person or community might do is insignificant.

The good news – Jesus’ ministry continues in Mark’s account and also in our world, in our time as he sends folk to heal, to love, to testify, to feed in his name. He sends folk to minister to us; and he calls us to minister to one another and all the world. And that ministry is effective, bringing about transformed lives, as we know so well. We know what it means when someone cares, stands up for the right, accepts us for ourselves. We know what it means to be called out of our frustrations and fears to be caring and giving, to be transformed into the person God creates us to be.
The good news – that even though Jesus will, himself, be betrayed and captured and deserted and crucified, yet he will rise and gather all God’s children into newness, into God’s very self. He shows us that in him God does not desert us but accompanies us through all that evil can do and, by God’s power and grace, so unlike most of the ways of the world, brings us to new life.

As the Epistle writer announces, Christ

Blesses us
Chooses us
Adopts us
Forgives us
Redeems us
Marks us as his own

We baptize in the name of the Triune God because we know this to be true. And not just us, here, not just a few, but all who seek God’s care.

There is no doubt in my mind that we live in an in-between state, often overwhelmed by those who would and do execute the speakers of truth, silence the tongues of God’s messengers, actually or figuratively, stand in the way of those who offer life-giving words and deeds. There is no doubt in my mind that I often participate in that process,
willingly sometimes, knowingly sometimes, unaware and unconcerned sometimes, aware and yet helplessly at other times.

And there is no doubt in my mind that we are shown another way for we have seen and heard the healing, saving, transforming, insistent and persistent power of God’s love in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, in the presence of the Holy Spirit among and within us. That is real in our lives. It is brought to us through one another, through friends and strangers, through endlessly varied means, and, yes, through these ancient yet contemporary texts.

A flag celebrating attempts to preserve slavery based upon race comes down. A professional association confesses its error and works to right itself.

Our UCC Statement of Faith speaks of the “cost and joy of discipleship.” Today we remembered David so happy that God has chosen to live among the people that he dances with delight and joy before the Ark of the Covenant. And we’re reminded that John pays with his head and Jesus will pay with his life but that is not the end of the story. God’s love is the end as God brings us, in Christ, into God’s very self.
So let us receive these gifts of love and life by the power of God’s Spirit.

Years ago I was present at the installation of two “lay canons” of the Church of England, lay members charged with particular responsibilities in the life of the Diocese of Salisbury. They were prayed for with the words, “May you have the wisdom to know the will of God and the courage to do it.”

Today I pray that we will have the wisdom to remember and to know again the grace and power of God’s love and the courage to live it even in the face of the many powers around us and within us doing their utmost to deny it. We are, indeed, blessed, chosen, adopted, forgiven, redeemed, marked by a loving God who claims us utterly by giving us life itself. Every time opportunity knocks, and even when it doesn’t, let us live and share this good news.