

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

We have been living in some weird times.

After much hoopla, Michael Jackson is resting in an undisclosed location in a gold-plated casket.

After a period of terror in Cherokee County, a terrible series of violent events in Gaffney came to an end amid another hail of bullets.

Our governor and the governor of Alaska have made strange news in different ways.

This odd world of ours, however, seems not so different from Herod's decadent court, with his scheming family and propensity for violence.

Or from David dancing naked before the ark.

Poor Herod. Poor Herod. The words seem strange to speak and hear!

And yet we must pity one so misguided, so unable to hear the voice of God, so prone to surrender to the whims of others.

This Herod is not the same Herod as he who tried to get the wise men to lead his soldier to the manger.

That was Herod the Great, the father of this man, who was himself only the petty tyrant of Galilee.

This is Herod Antipas and Mark tells us the sad story of his execution of John the Baptist.

We are meant to receive here a premonition of Christ's own fate.

Herod's problem was a total lack of moral formation.

He had nothing to guide him but the opinions of others, his own insecurity, his desire to be liked, feared, and respected.

He spent little time with scriptures; his prayer life was probably stunted. He did not gather in a sacred assembly of mutual accountability, as you have done today.

His guilty conscience revealed his own knowledge of his injustice; on hearing the good news about Jesus' miracles, he immediately assumed he was being haunted by John whom he had executed.

He was haunted by his own sin.

There were many reasons for Herod's fall, all of them rooted in Herod's poorly developed spiritual and moral life, in his unwillingness to live honestly.

We are told that Herod thought John a holy man, that he liked listen to him.

Yet on another level, he must have been tired of John's searing honesty, of hearing John's opinion that his marriage was wrong.

It was easier to send the prophet to the chopping block than to listen to his criticism, criticism that invited him to real self-knowledge.

That decision certainly pleased Herod's wife, who wanted the prophet's criticism silenced.

But note that Herod's final failure was not prompted by his wife and daughter, who are too often depicted at the worst villains in this story.

No, he sent John to the block in order to save face in front of his friends.

There were the other prominent and powerful men of Galilee, men who Herod needed on his side, men he needed to respect and fear him.

It was for their sake more than anyone's that Herod sent John to his death.

This story is placed in the Gospel of Mark between the sending out of the disciples on their mission of teaching and healing in Galilee and their return, which includes a joyful report of their success.

Mark places it here as a reminder that the holy and righteous people are not promised good treatment in this world.

The disciples' ministry, the church's ministry, will not be easy.

And moreover, Christ's own ministry was not to be easy.

The Kingdom of God did not descend over the earth at his birth, never to be disrupted by the forces of sin and death.

No, the disciples and we experience the Kingdom of God in bits and

pieces, in glimpses, constantly interrupted by the forces, some of them deep within us, that oppose Christ and his reign.

The Baptist lived through that opposition and violence and Christ did as well.

For Pilate made similar choices, fearing the Emperor and the people, with no God-given moral vision of his own to sustain him.

No prayer; no reading of Scripture; nothing holy outside himself to guide him.

And history is full of people like them; indeed we all have the capacity to be just like them.

But we also have the capacity to be better;

In Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, God has given us the capacity to live toward the Kingdom of God, even in the messy, weird, sometime meanness of this world.

That is the beautiful message of Ephesians, that the Father has blessed us with every spiritual blessing, that he has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless.

Riches of grace have been lavished upon us; wisdom and insight, that we might live for the praise of his glory;

That we might live differently from Herod and Pilate and the other empty men whose hearts have not been made new through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Perhaps that is the image; they were hollow men, nothing to them, self-interested in the short-term, destined to be forgotten in the long.

But we have been made new; if any of us are in Christ, you are a new creation.

Our former emptiness is filled.

Where self-love and interest reigned, now there is faith and hope and love.

Each day gives us a chance to share the good news by revealing God's good gifts in Christ that are now the core of our being.

In choices that are dramatic and mundane, we can turn away from the hollow decadence that surrounds us and manifest the grace and glory of God.

Indeed, we have this great privilege; we can share in God's redemption of the world.