

A Prophet's Challenge

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

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We are journeying with Jesus, walking with Him through the time that He walked here with His feet on this earth, with the dust that was being kicked up by His feet falling all over His disciples and followers so they would know who He is, what He is all about, learn His ways, and then be able to share that with others. And that is what we do as well. We learn about Jesus. We learn His ways. We learn who He is. We look to Him. And then we share that with others today. We are specifically talking about this prophet and the challenge that prophets have. Mr. Ray talked about it just a moment ago, that sometimes when you speak God's truth, even in love, the story does not end the way you want it to. It is a difficult thing to do.

For John, we see that that story did not end gloriously, in a sense, because we think of happy endings as "happily ever after." The story did not end that way today. But the story is not over. John's story was just the beginning of what Jesus was going to do. In fact, the way that Mark is telling the story of Jesus, John is an amazingly important figure. In Mark chapter 6:14ff, the heading says *the Death of John the Baptist*. Two things happen in this section. We learn what happens to John the Baptist, and then we see what Jesus is all about. So why do we care about John the Baptist?

Did you know that the Gospel of Mark does not start with Jesus being born? Instead, what does Mark begin with? John the Baptist. He starts with John the Baptist. He is the beginning of the Jesus story for Mark. And John the Baptist comes from the wilderness into the crowds of people and says, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." Now that sounds a little bit ominous when we use the word repent. But really it is a good thing. It is a call to say, "Look out. Something new is happening." And when he says the kingdom of God is near or at hand, what he is saying is that God's goodness, like God's favor for you, God's plan, everything that He has in store for you is right here. It is right here. It is close. It is right here just for

you. So, John comes out of the wilderness, speaking all these things, and eventually, he looks and sees someone who is coming to him. and he says, "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." And he is looking right at Jesus. And he baptizes Jesus, and we hear the Father say, "This is my son with whom I am well pleased." From that moment on in Mark, Jesus begins this incredible ministry where He heals people. He raises people from the dead. He helps people see God more clearly, and He brings them into the kingdom of God.

John the Baptist is hugely important in this. So, we do not hear again about John the Baptist until right here, until we find out about his death. I want you to go down to verses 19 and 20. Chapter six, verses 19 and 20 says this, "and Herodias had a grudge against him, against John the Baptist, and wanted him to be put to death, but she could not do it for her husband, Herod, feared John, respected him knowing that he was a righteous and holy man and kept him safe. Because when he heard John speak, even though he was perplexed, he heard him gladly." See, John was a prophet called to tell the king that what he was doing was not right. It was not according to the word of God or the will of God. And as this king purported to lead God's people, he was not doing it the right way.

And it is interesting that Herod listened to that. How often, when other people tell us we are not doing things the right way, do we want to just simply push them aside? We want to just turn off that channel. We want to block those people. Instead, there was something more to it. I think what Herod realized was that this was not somebody who was just complaining about him. We all get people that complain to us or at us or sometimes even with us. This was somebody who was speaking God's truth to him. And it challenged him. He knew what he had done was not according to God's word, and yet he did it anyway. And God was telling him, "This is not right. Make it right." I think sometimes in our lives, we are in that same position where we know sometimes the things that we have done are not what God would have us do. And we wonder, "Can we make this right? Can we make this right?" Herod's in the same position, wondering, "Can God make this right?" So he listens to John. He respects him. He fears him. But then, things happen. Things happen. His position takes over his status.

His unwillingness to be ashamed in front of his peers takes over, and John the Baptist suffers the consequences. His head is literally served up on a platter during this party.

Prophets do not often make it out alive. That is just the nature of what prophets do. When they come to speak God's word to people, when they tell them really hard things, especially those with power, they do not come out unscathed. Prophets either are killed, or they are banished and sent away. In Amos today, in the Old Testament reading that we read last service, we heard about how Amos was banished from Israel. He went there to preach and to speak God's word to the king who was going the wrong way, who was worshiping different gods. And the king and all those people just say, "Get out. Get out. Just do not bother us. We are living our lives. We are doing things the way we want to do it. We do not need you. So please leave. And if you do not leave nicely, we are going to forcibly remove you."

Prophets do not often live to see the words of their prophecies lived out. But they serve an incredible purpose. Because what prophets do is they point to God. They point God's people back to Him when we have strayed, when we have gone and given into those temptations that we so often do. Prophets are people who speak God's word to you point us back to God. They also prepare our hearts for seeing that God is not someone to be eternally afraid of. This is the key. The prophets are preparing people's hearts to say, "Yes, God does not want you to do that." But what is the very thing that brings people back, which the Baptist was holding up for everyone was saying, "Turn around. See that God is here and that His kingdom is for you. And then it is right here. And that in this kingdom, there is hope, and there is grace, and there is peace in God alone. You can have that. Just see that He is the king and that you are not." And that is often the most difficult thing in the whole world, coming to the realization that we are not in control of everything in our lives.

People who speak God's word to us remind us that that is true and that God is in control, and that He has a plan, and that His kingdom is greater than any kingdom that we could build on our own. And in His kingdom, there is peace, and there is grace. And most of all, there is forgiveness for

every single thing that we have ever done or failed to do for others. This is what the prophets are calling to do. This is what they are doing for us. This is what they are doing back to us at this time. John was not just there to tell the king, you messed up. He was there to tell the king, that there is forgiveness in God's name. Just turn and see that and recognize that.

So, John does not make it out there alive because Herod does not turn and see. Herod does not turn and see. This story was a flashback to a time when this happened, but in the current telling, in Mark 6, at the very beginning in verse 14, we get to the current day. John had already been killed a while ago. But now, Jesus is going around doing more incredible things. He is raising people from the dead. His Reputation is being told all throughout the lands. Everybody has heard of Him. So, of course, King Herod has as well. When Herod heard of it, because His name had become so well known, some people were saying that John the Baptist had been raised from the dead. Because remember, Jesus could do that. And who killed John the Baptist? Who's going to get back at King Herod? Well, I'm just saying they might be afraid. This is why these miraculous powers are at work in him. Others say Jesus is a prophet of old, like Elijah. But when Herod heard of it, he was convinced. It is John, whom I beheaded. He has been raised.

Everybody is wondering who Jesus is. Some people are afraid. That the things that they have done, they are going to get what they deserve for it. That the things that they have messed up, the ways that they have fallen short of what God has called them to do, that they are going to get just what they deserve. And this is all a mystery. People are all trying to figure out who Jesus is. They are trying to figure out what God is doing through this Jesus who is doing all these incredible things that nobody else has ever seen before.

So this is a question for you today: *What is God doing amongst us?* And *who is Jesus in the midst of this?* Is He just a prophet? Is He just somebody who is speaking God's word? Or is there something more that is happening? At this point in Mark chapter 6, we have not gotten anywhere close to Good Friday and Easter. The people have no idea of what we

already know that Jesus has died for us, that He has been raised again from the dead, that He gives us life through what He has won.

They are still wondering. But Paul makes this clear. This was in our epistle reading today, that God has now revealed to us His mysteries, especially His entire plan. He wanted to do all of this from the very beginning, that at just the right time, He would bring together everything in heaven and on earth, all in the Christ, in Messiah, in Jesus, that is. His plan from the very beginning was to bring someone who would bring us back to Him. And it is this that tears away the veil from our eyes when we realize that Jesus is actually the plan and always has been, to look to Him for all the things that we yearn for, the ways that we need to be forgiven, the ways that we need to overcome the guilt and the shame that we feel each and every day, the ways that we need that purpose—we need to know why we are doing what we are doing.

You know why we are here. We need to know why we are here with these people. What does God have in store for us? Jesus is the center of that plan. Paul continues, “Look, God is so rich in kindness and so rich in grace that He purchased our freedom with the blood of His son. And because of that, He forgave all our sins.” The key here is that God is so rich in kindness and grace. See, we all think that we want to get what we deserve, but what we deserve is to be separated from God. But God gives us so much better than what we deserve. It is not fair. It is not fair at all. And that is the beauty of grace is that He gives us a gift, not because we have done anything or earned it, but simply because He loves us. Because He loves us and takes joy in this plan to bring us back to Him, God decided in advance to adopt us into His family and brought us back to Himself through Jesus. And it gave him joy. I love that phrase, that everything that happened, the plan coming to fruition at just the right time, gave Him joy.

Now, was there joy in the hardship of John the Baptist being a prophet? Was there joy in the terrible end that came to his life? No, that is not the joy. The joy was seeing that Jesus could bring everyone back to God, that although He had to pay for it, the joy would be eternal, the joy would be complete, the joy would be made whole, that all of us would see what God has done for us, that we would see His plan—the plan that has always been.

Jesus has always been plan A. There was no plan B. There was nothing else that God was going to do for us because Jesus was always going to be it. At just the right time, He came to us to bring the kingdom of God, to bring us into that kingdom by His blood, and when He was raised from the dead, to remind us that we are victorious over all of the things that bring us down, that bring suffering and guilt and shame. No more do we need to focus on those, or experience those, or let those dwell, because He, because He has taken those all from us. He has paid the price for them, and in its place, He gives us life. He gives us a life that is filled with joy, a life that is filled with great people around us, a life that is filled with purpose.

Why are we here? We are here to give Him glory with everything that we do. Why are we here in this place at this time? Because there are people around us who need to see and experience what Jesus has in store for them, just like all the people who are following Jesus in Mark 4 and 5. We are those same people, focusing on Him, seeing what He is doing, seeing His gift to us, and then sharing it with the people around us. How do we speak the truth like a prophet? We speak of God's kingdom, of the hope that we have. Knowing that He is the one who has done everything for us, we live with confidence today, knowing that we are confident for all of time.

Let's close with a word of prayer together. Heavenly Father, today, we come before You thankful that You love us, and that You have given Your son Jesus for us to bring us back to You. We give You thanks, Lord, that there are many people who speak Your truth to us. We ask, Lord, that we would hear them, that we would listen to them, that when we go astray, when we give in to temptation, Lord, we would hear Your word and return to You lovingly, knowing that You forgive us completely and fully. And Lord, we pray that as part of Your kingdom, we would help others see this as well, not that they have to be perfect to be part of the kingdom, but that in their brokenness, Jesus comes to them and heals them just like He heals us. In this Lord, give us strength and courage to speak the truth of Your loving word to those around us. We pray it all in Jesus' name. Amen.