

July 14, 2024  
Lectionary 15, Year B  
The 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Mark 6:14-29  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

### The Kingdom of God Has Drawn Near

The gospel of Mark begins with John the Baptist. He's preaching in the wilderness around the Jordan River, dressed in animal skins with a leather belt around his waist. He's eating bugs and honey. And he's proclaiming the kingdom of God drawn near. He's a character.

People were coming to him, to be baptized, for the forgiveness of their sins. John baptized them, but even as he was doing it, he was promising something more, something new, someone else coming, who would bring, not water and a promise, but the Holy Spirit, God's own presence dwelling with them, and in them.

John drew a following, disciples who followed him and helped him in his ministry, and the many, many people who came out from Jerusalem and the whole Judean countryside to be baptized and to hear him preach. His ministry was a movement. In the gospels of Matthew and Luke we hear how that movement drew the attention of the religious leaders in Jerusalem, who came out to see what John the Baptist was up to and who seemed to recognize that he might be a challenge to them, to their power and authority.

In our gospel reading last week, we heard about the mission of the twelve, the mission that Jesus sent them on, with their staffs, their tunics, and their sandals and only one other thing. The other thing that Jesus gave them for that mission was the most important thing, more important than money or food or changes of clothes. Jesus gave them his own power over unclean spirits. He sent them out to proclaim repentance, just as John the Baptist had done, when he was proclaiming that the kingdom of God had drawn near.

The disciples did not baptize. Here is what they did do. They cast out demons and healed many who were sick, in Jesus' name and with Jesus' own power.

The gospels don't tell us that John the Baptist did any healing, but there must have been something similar about the disciples' ministry and John's, because when word spread about the ministry that the twelve did in Jesus' name; how there were men who few physical possessions, preaching in the villages and the wilderness places, steering clear of the places of power and preaching repentance, people began to speculate. Some said, "John the Baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason, these powers are at work in Jesus." Others said, "It is Elijah." Elijah was supposed to come before the Messiah. Some had believed that John himself had been Elijah. Others thought that Jesus must have been a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.

But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." (Mark 6:16)

Herod, it seems, had a classic guilty conscience. Herod had had John arrested because John had been critiquing Herod's marriage and Herodias, his wife, was angry enough with John to want to kill him. And ultimately, she had her way. She manipulated a situation so that Herod was put into a position where, to save face with his friends, he had to his daughter, Herodias, whatever she asked, and, her mother told her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Since Herod couldn't go back on his word in front of his guests, he gave her, and therefore, gave her mother, his wife, what she wanted. The head of the prophet, John, on a platter.

But, of course, John's message, had not been a message about himself. His message had been that the Kingdom of God had drawn near. And his death could not stop that message. It couldn't stop the power of God that had been set loose in the world in Jesus. It couldn't stop the ministry of compassion, of power, of love that had drawn near to the world in John, in Jesus, and then in Jesus' disciples.

Herod, who had a guilty conscience, saw in the signs of the kingdom, the return of John the Baptist. He saw it, perhaps, as a judgment on him. But it wasn't that. It was just that the message that John the Baptist had proclaimed, lived on after him, and continued to touch the world.

When I teach First Communion, I share a book with the kids by Daniel Erlander, called A Place for You: My Holy Communion Book. At the beginning of the book, it tells us how Jesus showed God's love in the world by healing people, welcoming the outcast, telling stories about God's love, offering people forgiveness, feeding people, and teaching people how to love each other. Throughout the book there is a group of cranky people who are made even more cranky by Jesus' ministry. They decide that they have to get rid of him and ultimately, they do it by having him crucified. Of course, they don't expect Jesus' resurrection and they certainly don't expect the Holy Spirit, who strengthens Jesus' followers. And the next thing you know, there's a whole group of people, a growing, growing, growing group of people who are showing God's love in the world by: healing people, welcoming the outcast, telling stories about God's love, offering people forgiveness, feeding people, and teaching people how to love each other. And the cranky people are there, looking around in shock and horror, saying to each other, "I thought we put a stop to this."

Throughout history those in power have frequently tried to stop Jesus' message from spreading. They arrested its messengers. They killed Jesus and then they killed his disciples. But they just couldn't stop the good news, that the kingdom of God had come near in Jesus and that that kingdom brought with it welcome and healing and forgiveness and compassion and love, poured from one person to the next and unstoppable in its power.

Needless to say, this sermon required some rewriting after the shocking and tragic events at the Trump political rally yesterday evening. My mother-in-law called us right after it happened and told us to turn on the news. I called my mother

and sister to let them know. The rest of the evening I watched a news app to get updates about what was happening and what was being said. But I stopped looking when it seemed like we were moving from news, from facts to speculation and expressions of outrage. I actually snoozed a Facebook friend who had decided to start assigning blame for the shooting, without any evidence or fact, just the narrative that she wanted to promote, that she wanted to believe in. I could see the situation devolving, from the righteous horror at an act of political violence, at yet another assault against the very fabric of our nation, to more apocalyptic and hate filled political discourse.

The reality is that the world that we live in is not the world we want to live in. It's not the world that we want to bequeath to our children, to our community's children, to the world's children. And sometimes it's hard not to let fear, let shock, let outrage, let political opinions and political passions, and our worries, our fear for those who will come after us, persuade us that we can act in ways, speak in ways, think in ways that are not faithful to who we are, to who we have been called to be.

And who have we been called to be? We have been called to be people on a mission, people who proclaim by our words and by our actions, actions of mercy, actions of healing, actions that display our heart deep trust in God, that the kingdom of God has drawn near.

Tomorrow, Rebecca Sol and I leave with six youth of our church, to attend the National Youth Gathering in New Orleans, where, in worship, in service, in songs, in stories, I hope that we will see glimpses of the kingdom of God come near. That kingdom that so many people and powers of this world have tried to corrupt, have tried to co-opt, have tried to manipulate to their own advantage and enrichment, or have just tried to stop, but that just keeps going, in ways big and small.

I hope that on our journey, on our adventure, we will all hear how we are called to be proclaimers of the kingdom of God, that we will be inspired to be brave bringers of peace, of healing, of justice, of love, to the communities that we are a part of, to our families, to our friend groups, to our congregation, to our schools, and workplaces.

I hope that we will see that each of us is loved, valued, fearfully and wonderfully created people of God.

I hope that we will see hope. I hope that that we will be inspired, comforted, and challenged. I hope that we will have stories of good news to share with you, when we get back, in a world that has had more than enough of bad news.

I hope that the world that our youth are being invited to participate in creating by the God who created them, will be more like the world that we would want to give to our children. I hope that we will hear at the Gathering, what we all need to hear, breaking through the violence and grief of this blood-soaked world; the proclamation of John the Baptist, and so many who have come after him, that the kingdom of God has drawn near. Amen.