

Herod

What are we getting into when we say yes to this God who is not the god of America, or the god of a select few, but the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, -- the God of Jesus?

The prophet Amos begins to answer that question today, and the writer of the gospel of Mark finishes it.

First, a word about Amos.

If you ever need to know the definition of: "Who, me?!" -- just look up Amos in the dictionary.

Amos, who never took a single class in theology, Amos, who spent not a day in the seminary; finds himself, this dresser of Sycamore trees, uprooted from his life in the forest and sent off to tell the Corrupt King of his day that his days are numbered.

Just as he pierced the small, nearly tasteless fig-like fruit that Sycamore trees give to the poor, for that is what a dresser of Sycamore trees does, so Amos is now called to pierce the sensibilities of the powers that be.

Amos encounters the God who sends us to places we do not know -- this God who sends us with no preparation: with only the command to: "Fear not, I am with you."

You know this God -- for he has and continue to disrupt your life and mine -- taking us from our Sycamore trees of raising children and careers and families and retirement and sending us -- one and all -- to places where we would rather not go.

We are in good company, for today we are pushed into the cold, moldy, damp -- the dank darkness of the prison cell that holds another man who dared pierce the sensibilities of the powers that be -- John, the Baptist.

His crime?

Insisting that Herod, the junior king of a small section of Galilee, change his profligate ways.

For you see, Herod is a mess.

He is married to a woman who is not only his brother's wife but who is his niece as well.

And the little girl Salome, who has him drooling while she dances -- well, she's probably not some twenty-something beauty, but most likely a child of 10 or 11.

Herod is a mess; yet even in his mess, there is something in him that knows what John says is true.

He despises John, and yet he hangs on John's every word.

The inner conflict that finds so many drawn to a life of instant gratification while at the same time feeling the urge for the holy, the tug of the transcendent; this is Herod's struggle.

Perhaps it is yours too.

Perhaps it is mine.

And here we are.

The absurdity of the last and greatest prophet of God in the clutches of Herod and his depraved family is laughably tragic; it is a horrific comedy; a nauseating irony.

Oscar Wilde's powerful play, *Salome*, has the furious wife Herodias insisting that the wild prophet be silenced; while the drunken king is torn this way and that over what to do and how to do it; and all the while, Oscar Wilde paints the portrait of a rich family beset by boredom and envy and alcohol.

It is in the telling of this sad, bizarre story that Mark answers the question:

"What are we getting into when we say yes to the true God?"

As always, context is key.

Just before today's episode in Mark, Jesus sends out the twelve to heal and teach and spread the good news.

Immediately following today's episode, the disciples return full of joy at the power of God flowing through them.

It is between these bookends that Mark tells us the story of John the Baptist and Herod.

And it seems that Mark is telling us, even warning us, that while the power that passes through you when you say "yes" to this God is a marvelous thing, there is always something else.

That same journey of healing and preaching can also land you smack dab into the clutches of those who give their lives to other gods; those who are terrified of the living God; those who would just as soon have your head on a platter at a party.

Oh come on!

Maybe back then such things were the worry.

Back then, the church was small, it's members few, it's opponents legion.

But today, Christianity is everywhere, claiming nearly half the world's population as believers.

Surely today we needn't worry about ending up like John.

But in truth, it all gets back to knowing the God we follow.

The fact is, many Christians today don't follow the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; many follow something else.

Too many who sign up on the Christian dotted line instead and in fact follow idols of nationalism, of violence, of materialism, and celebrity.

The list is long; their tentacles powerful.

Amos, and Mark, invite us each to ask again: whom do you follow?

To answer that question, it helps to remember again just who this Jesus is; and equally important to remember who he isn't.

Back in Mark's day, up until today, there are voices that argue that the death of Jesus is something unique, a one-of-a-kind - never to be duplicated, death.

All the way back in Mark's day, up until today, there are voices that argue that the death of Jesus is a death removed from our common experience and as such, we can admire it from a distance, while we get on with our lives of security and common sense and power and patriotism.

It seems that Mark is cautioning us that it is the easiest thing to put Jesus high on a pedestal -- to admire him rather than follow him.

Because, it is precisely here that Mark, in telling us the tragedy of John's beheading, this tragedy is all about helping us see that not only is John's death not unique, Jesus' death is not unique either.

Like John, Jesus is killed by a reluctant pagan at the instigation of angry people.

Like John, Jesus has upset the power structure.

Like John, Jesus gets no fair trial, but only a midnight order of a death sentence.

Like John, Jesus is killed and his body taken to a tomb.

Like the prophets, the Son too is killed.

Why does it matter?

In Oscar Wilde's play, Herod says, when he is told that Jesus is raising people from the dead:

"I do not wish him to do that! I forbid him to do that! I suffer no man to raise the dead!
The man must be found and told I forbid him to raise the dead!"

Kings and governments and employers and the powers and principalities all stake their power in their ability to kill -- to take life as the final and most compelling reason to insist on your obedience and mine.

Is it any wonder these days that while it is an honor to die for your country, only fanatics die for their faith?

So, if suddenly death is not the worst thing; if suddenly, death is defeated, then the powers of this world have lost; and it is the fear of that loss that causes them to join the Herod's of the world in shouting:

"The man must be found and told I forbid him to raise the dead!"

And so Jesus, like John, like all the prophets sent by God before them, dies a commoner's death.

The death of Jesus is not special.

It is no different than the millions of executions carried out over the millennia.

And that's why it matters so much.

It matters because the death that John endures, the death that Jesus endures, is not something we place in the trophy room and polish; rather, the death of Jesus sanctifies

all deaths of all persons who are killed, who are dispatched, by those who claim the power of this world.

The death of Jesus sanctifies every death in Sudan, in Syria, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Manhattan and in downtown Honolulu.

Every time a child of God is killed, Jesus sanctifies that death with his own death.

If you dust off your Sunday school memories, you may recall hearing Jesus' death described as a ransom.

Jesus himself says he came to give his life as a ransom; although nowhere in the gospels does he explain what he means.

How on earth can the death of Jesus be considered a ransom?

Some explain it as a ransom God pays to the devil -- making God look like the father of a kidnapping victim.

The argument goes that humanity is the kidnap victim, and in exchange for the life of Jesus -- handed over to the devil like a bag of gold coins -- the devil gives us back to God.

Others say the ransom is paid to appease an angry God

Jesus dies to satisfy the God who is furious with humankind.

Yet we know God is Trinity Trinity in love.

So how can one lover demand the life of his beloved for any purpose?

No, it seems perhaps the ransom Jesus pays when he dies for us is the ransom that rescues us from our natural state: that natural state in which we demand an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; that natural state where the strong prevail and the weak are on their own; that natural state where we are dust, and to dust shall we return, and thus we fear death and seek vain idols to somehow protect us from the finality of death.

It is from this natural state that Jesus ransoms, that Jesus rescues, us.

The author of Psalm 49 knows it well:

"We can never ransom ourselves, or deliver to God the price of our life; for the ransom of our life is so great, that we should never have enough to pay it, in order to live forever and never see the grave...

"But God will ransom my life, he will snatch me from the grasp of death."

By casting his lot with the worst among us; with the worst that is in each of us, Jesus lives out completely, and to the very end, the way of life God intends us to live.

He lives out the truth of loving our enemies.

He lives out the truth of giving up our lives, and giving out fearless witness to the all embracing love that God has for all of humanity, a love that never lets us go, not even in death.

Perhaps by becoming just another ordinary victim of the world of power and money and celebrity, Jesus enters into all of our debauchery, into all of those lives that are, like Herod, at once terrified, yet also enchanted by, the call of God; that, like yeast hidden within a measure of flour, like a seed secretly growing, Jesus corrupts and destroys the power of the world we create in our image, overwhelming it and finally replacing it with a new world created in the image of God, the world we call the kingdom of God!

+ amen