

**North-Prospect United Church of Christ
July 16, 2000, Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Reverend Jessica McArdle**

Scripture: Mark 6:14-29

Title: "Where is God in This?"

Lead-in to reading scripture: I confess that when I read the lectionary selection for this Sunday, I wondered if I could even work with this material. Today's selection is about the beheading of John the Baptist, a lurid if not gruesome account of an execution, done on the spur of the moment by a powerful yet impetuous ruler. Yet to the question, "Where is God in this?" this passage provides the essential context. The reading from the Gospel of Mark...

Scripture Reading:

Mark 6:14 King Herod heard about Jesus, because [Jesus] was now well known. Some people said, "[Jesus] is John the Baptist, who has risen from the dead. That is why he can work these miracles."

Mark 6:15 Others said, "[Jesus] is Elijah." Other people said, "Jesus is a prophet, like the prophets who lived long ago."

Mark 6:16 When Herod heard this, he said, "I killed John by cutting off his head. Now [John] has risen from the dead!"

Mark 6:17 [For earlier] Herod himself had ordered his soldiers to arrest John and put him in prison in order to please his wife, Herodias. She had been the wife of Philip, Herod's brother, but then Herod had married her.

Mark 6:18 John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to be married to your brother's wife."

Mark 6:19 So Herodias hated John and wanted to kill him. But she couldn't, Mark 6:20 because Herod was afraid of John and protected him. He knew John was a good and holy man. Also, though John's preaching bothered him, he enjoyed listening to [him].

Mark 6:21 Then the perfect time came for Herodias to cause John's death. On Herod's birthday, he gave a dinner party for the most important government leaders, the commanders of his army, and the most important people in Galilee.

Mark 6:22 When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and the people eating with him. So King Herod said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I will give it to you."

Mark 6:23 He promised her, "Anything you ask for I will give to you--up to half of my kingdom."

Mark 6:24 The girl went to her mother and asked, "What should I ask for?" Her mother answered, "Ask for the head of John the Baptist."

Mark 6:25 At once the girl went back to the king and said to him, "I want the head of John the Baptist right now on a platter."

Mark 6:26 Although the king was [grieved], he had made a promise, and his dinner guests had heard it. So he did not want to refuse what she asked.

Mark 6:27 Immediately the king sent a soldier to bring John's head. The soldier went and cut off John's head in the prison

Mark 6:28 and brought it back on a platter. He gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother.

Mark 6:29 When John's followers heard this, they came and got John's body and put it in a tomb.

Herein ends the reading from the Gospel of Mark.

Will you pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts, always be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Introduction: While in seminary, there was a student in my preaching class, who had a magnificent voice. We used to jokingly say that just to listen to him reading the names out of a telephone book would be enough. Yet this student, I'll call him Andrew, had had a very difficult life. He had grown up in a tough inner city neighborhood of Chicago. Violence was not a stranger to Andrew as a boy. Early he learned to always watch his back. Yet there were good times too. He grew up with members of his large extended family: sisters, brothers, aunts and uncles. Andrew was particularly close to one of his cousins. The boys played basketball at a nearby court, vying for the best shot. On hot summer evenings, they would play with their friends long after dark. They attended school, dances and games together. They were best friends as well as cousins, as they grew from boyhood into their youth.

Yet the violence that was on the streets could not be prevented from invading their homes. One morning, an argument erupted between his cousin and the boy's father. Without warning, his father seized a handgun and fired two shots at his son. The boy didn't stand a chance. He died within moments. For Andrew, his cousin's death was senseless, an utter waste.

After he told us this story, Andrew asked us this question, "Where is God in this?" (pause)

1) Does John the Baptist's tragic death say anything about God?

Well to begin with, not much. Herod had the last word. After all, in a world of political and economic power, the Herods do have the last word, or so it seems. John, even though Herod knew that John the Baptist was a good man, a righteous man, even though he knew that what John was saying was right, (Herod was involved in an incestuous relationship), John's life was snuffed out. Good conduct didn't hold

water here. A righteous life wasn't enough to keep John alive. John was, like so many of us, powerless in the face of circumstances beyond our control. John, despite his prophetic voice, despite his faith in God, despite all that he was and could have been, could not stop tragedy from happening to him.

Where was God for John?

- 2) **Yet there is more.** At the beginning of this same chapter in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus himself experiences a rough episode, and by folks whom he cared a great deal about, friends and family that he grew up with in Nazareth. When he came back to his old neighborhood, Jesus spoke at the local synagogue. Yet he was derided, ridiculed. People pointed at Jesus and said, "Where does he get the authority to say such things? Are not his brothers and sisters all here? Is not this the carpenter's son?" They looked at him incredulously. "We know him, he grew up here, my kids played with him when they were young. Who does he think he is?"

It didn't matter that this was the same Jesus who fed five thousand people with only two fish and five loaves of bread. And in the eyes of those who heckled him in the village synagogue, it didn't matter that that this was the same Jesus who walked across the turbulent waters of a violent sea. Even for all Jesus was, and all he could do, where was God for Jesus when people scorned and rejected him?

Where was God for God's beloved son, God's chosen One?

Where was God in this?

- 3) **It is an interesting chapter, chapter six in the Gospel of Mark.** There is the commissioning of the disciples to go into active ministry. Jesus called the twelve and sent them out, two by two, and gave them authority to cast out demons and cure sickness. Then there is the feeding of the five thousand where Jesus looked up to heaven, and blessing and breaking bread, and dividing two fish, he gave his disciples the food to set out before the people. All ate and were filled. There is the account of Jesus walking the waters of a storm-tossed sea. Remember? The disciples were terrified; but Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." Where is the presence of God more evident than in the miracles of Jesus or Jesus sending his disciples to do ministry? In these accounts, God is active! God hears the needs of God's people! God is undeniably present! But what of the other accounts? The Gospels tell that the people from the village of Nazareth became so angry with Jesus that they tried to drive him off a cliff. As for John the Baptist? He was the object of so much contempt that his dismembered body was displayed for the amusement of palace guests.

Where was God in this?

Where was God for Jesus?

Where was God for John?

4) Which leads to an even more important question. Where is God for you? (pause) Where is God for you?

In the Old Testament, the prophet Amos wrote:

“The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I shall send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread or a thirst of water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.” (Amos 8:11-12).

Where is God for you? (pause)

In her book, “When God is Silent”, Barbara Brown Taylor points to what we’d rather not admit, but only know too well. Why is it when we need to hear words of guidance or comfort or compassion from God, God is silent? Why is it when we need God to protect us, to avenge those who hurt us, God is absent?

Where is God for you, for us? (pause)

In the first books of the Old Testament, God is active. God speaks, and creation happens. Abraham is sent from Haran onward to the land of Canaan, sent forth by God’s command. Issac is saved from certain death by an angel of the Lord. Jacob sees a powerful vision of stairs leading up to heaven. Joseph saves Egypt from certain starvation because God was with him. Moses, the prince of Egypt who heard God speaking to him through a burning bush, is called by God to free his people. Surely in those days God for there for God’s people.

Where is God for you? (pause)

Have you ever suspected that what the prophet Amos said is true? That there is a famine; not for words about God, we hear words more than enough. In our newspapers, over the television and the Internet, and yes, in our churches, we use a great deal of God language. Yet the famine that Amos spoke of was something far more ominous. What Amos spoke of is our yearning to recognize the very presence of God, to know that God speaks to us and for us – plainly, audibly. To know that we are not alone, that God is there for us.

Where is God for you? (pause)

Having witnessed and endured the terrors of the Nazi regime, the author Elie Wiesel wrote of an innocent Jewish boy who was executed for a minor infraction. He was a small child; he couldn’t have been more than ten or eleven years old. Yet in the concentration camps, even the life of a child was derided. Before the eyes of his fellow prisoners, the boy was summarily hanged. As his small body hung from the coarse rope, an anguished prisoner asked Wiesel, “Where is God now?” and a voice within him replied, “Where is he? Here He is – He is hanging from this gallows...” (pause)

“For I took you from the ends of the earth, I called you from its farthest corners. I, [the Lord God], said to you, “You are my servant; I have chosen you and not cast you off, do not fear for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.” (Isaiah 41:9-10)

(pause)

When we enter God’s sanctuary with joy and thanksgiving, when we are so utterly dejected that we wish we were never born, when we are filled with an inexplicable peace, when we are overwrought with physical and/or emotional pain, when we seek to know God with all our hearts and minds, when we are certain that God has abandoned us – that is where God will be. Thanks be to God.