

## **"It is Tough Being a Prophet"**

Riverside United Church

February 4, 2024

**Scripture Lesson:** Mark 6: 1-29

### **The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth**

He left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him.

2On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!

3Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him.

4Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.'

5And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.

6And he was amazed at their unbelief.

### **The Mission of the Twelve**

Then he went about among the villages teaching.

7He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.

8He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts;

9but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.

10He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place.

11If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.'

12So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent.

13They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them..

### **The Death of John the Baptist**

14King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.'

15But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.'

16But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

17For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her.

18For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'

19And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.

21But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.

22When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.'

23And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.'

24She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.'

25Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.'

26The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.

27Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison,  
 28brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. 29When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

### **Prayer of Illumination:**

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,  
 and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,  
 lead us to deeper understanding of you,  
 and the love you call us to live. Amen.

### **“It is Tough Being a Prophet”**

I recently saw a meme on Facebook that has a teacher calling out to Matthew, Mark and Luke and saying that their book reports are remarkably similar.

Matthew, Mark and Luke are the first book of the New Testament and they were not writing book reports. They were writing gospels and so while they may seem remarkably similar there are some pretty significant differences in what they record in the story of the good news of Jesus Christ.

These authors were working with an oral tradition that had been alive for 30-40-50 years after the death of Jesus. Mark is written first and Matthew and Luke have access to Mark's writing and so the teacher in the meme maybe should have calling out Matthew and Luke for plagiarism. It would seem that Matthew and Luke have another common source because their work both includes words and teachings that are not in Mark. And each of them have some distinctive stories and sayings, and they structure the gospels in different ways.

We are working our way through the book of Mark, and one quality about Mark is that normally he is short and succinct. In the first chapter, Mark gives the opening purpose of the gospel, the proclamation of John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism, the temptation in the wilderness story and the calling of the first disciples all within the first 20 verses!

Today we hear the first half of chapter 6 which includes the story of the rejection of Jesus in his hometown, the sending out the disciples and then the rather lengthy (especially for Mark) account of the death of John the Baptist.

This reading prompted me to unpack a few boxes of books in my renovated office because I was looking for a couple of resources to help me figure out the reading - especially the story of the Herod's birthday party.

A number of years ago, I took a course on the movies made about Jesus. I remember learning that this scene of dance at Herod's party was included in some Jesus movies at a time when movie censors were pretty cautious about sensual scenes, but this scene gets included because the directors were able to argue that the scene was biblical! It really is not a very important scene in the gospel record, so it is intriguing why Mark gives it so many verses, more than Matthew or Luke, when he gives so few to other more significant or common stories.

I unpacked a bible dictionary that helped me to understand who Herodias is, and how many Herodias' there are in relation to Herod and with Louise's interest and expertise in genealogy, we were able to sort out that Herodias was both the niece and wife of Herod. John the Baptist had proclaimed that it is was wrong for them to be married, so that is why she was out to get John the Baptist.

I also learned that this scene with the king holding court and making a outlandish promise to someone - such as half the kingdom - was a common story telling technique in scripture called a court tale. The structure of these tales shows the foolishness of the king in comparison to the power of God. In the book of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar was no match to the faith of Daniel in the lions den or Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego in the fiery furnace.

But, where is the power of God revealed in this story. John the Baptist ends up dead. It is tough to be a prophet!

In researching and reflecting on that question, it is helpful to go back to the opening verses of chapter one and in the prologue about John the Baptist, we read that John the Baptist said, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me ..” This killing of John the Baptist foreshadows what is to come for Jesus. In the court tale with Herod, Jesus will be more powerful than John - not in avoiding death, but in death not being the end of the story. So this scene in chapter 6 is setting up what will come in chapter 15. The author of Mark was not writing a diary of the ministry of Jesus, but rather structures his narrative to convey what he wants to say about who Jesus is. If there was a teacher marking these gospel accounts, I hope Mark would get a high mark!

Mark’s narrative of the life and ministry of Jesus takes a turn into more depth with chapter six. The chapter begins with Jesus going home to Nazareth. Up until this point, we have heard that great crowds have sought Jesus. We have heard about the teachings and healing stories, so we might think there would be a great parade and banquet to welcome the hometown hero. But, it is not that way. The hometown folks don’t seem recognize Mary’s boy, the apprentice carpenter they thought they knew. His teachings aren’t all about hometown pride and so he is rejected. It is tough being a prophet.

The disciples are sent out two by two to teach and heal and they are warned that it will not all be roses and sunshine. It is tough to be a prophet.

Prophets are messengers of truth and it is not very often that the powers and principalities enjoy being told they are unjust or wrong. It was true in the biblical record and it is true in our time.

Have you heard any prophetic messengers of truth lately? In our post-modern context where truth is multi-faceted, we find ourselves living with so many narratives and ideas that it can be hard to know what is true and what is fake or false.

As we begin Black History month, we are invited to learn more about the prophets of the past and present, who articulate the reality of injustice and racism experienced by generations of people of African descent. Those messengers of truth have known and know how tough it is to help the powers and principalities to see the world through another perspective.

On the radio, the other day I heard someone speaking about Black History month and saying that it needed to be more than learning historical facts and stories about who was the first black person to be or do a certain thing. It also needed to be about learning about historical policies and attitudes that continue to affect the present reality, so that change can happen in our country and world.

The voices on the edges and margins of our society may have the important truth to tell us, but also have the most difficulty in finding a way to be heard.

There are some complex situations in our time and world, but sometimes the complexity becomes a source of paralysis and we don’t feel able to respond at all. The conflict in Gaza invites us to learn and find ways to

seek justice and peace, as we support the right to exist and dignity for both Palestinians and Israelis. And yet prophets in Nazareth are still hard to be heard. The way of terror and revenge is not the way to peace.

It is tough to know truth in a world where it is now popular to dismiss science, to be so polarized that nothing good can come from the other side or perspective. So, where will the voices of reason, of healing, of hope come from and how will they be heard?

The disciples of Jesus were learning that following this prophet of truth and love may be costly and that is a tough message for us to recognize in a faith context where it has been normative that it is assumed that were Christian. It is a challenge to be disciples of love, when Jesus' name is so often conveyed with judgement that it has been rejected by many.

As the season of Epiphany winds down, we continue to seek light and to follow the light of the world. As we dedicate our offering today, we will sing the 4<sup>th</sup> verse of Jim Strathdee's song I am the Light of the World. I love the love the images in this last verse as we seek to learn the mystery of what we are meant to do and be: "To bring hope to every task you do, to dance at baby's new birth, to make music in an old person's heart and sing to the colours of the earth!

Mary - Jesus' mother knew that it was going to be tough for her son to be a prophet. And yet she sang of his purpose from the moment of knowing she was going to give birth. She sang the Magnificat and in all the music of Christmas, the power of the words of her song can get sidestepped by tradition and pageantry.

But her words are prophetic. Let us sing her words and may our souls cry out as we seek to live as followers of Jesus, into a world, so in need of his way of truth, hope and love. Amen.