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Mark 6:14-29

Amos 7:7-15

Psalms 85:8-13

Ephesians 1:3-14

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The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

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It's the perfect plot for a suspense thriller. A forbidden relationship. A cautionary voice of reason. A brutal plan for revenge. As a bystander to the drama, you know the outcome before it happens...you've heard the whispers and the accusations. You've seen the plotting played out in dark corners. Tension builds and the fatal scheme is set in motion.

The victim falls in a devastating culmination of people's desire for power and control. A slain individual and the party just goes on around the crime. Dancing and eating, ignoring the atrocity right in front of them. And then, the antagonist, having succeeded, smiles as she walks out of the room. Victor in a deadly game of passion.

Such is the story of John the Baptist. Caught in a battle for truth and righteousness. Trying to do the right thing only to be met with scorn and brutality. John the Baptist who we have come to know as the one making the way for Christ, preaching redemption and forgiveness of sins, the pillar of courageous, faithful truth telling. And here, in Mark, we find him with an opportunity to tell some very difficult truths...not just to anyone, but to Herod.

What's interesting about the setup of this scene is that Herod has taken a liking to John. John speaks the truth to him and there is something within Herod that wants to listen even when the truth points to his own sinfulness. He's intrigued. You might say he's got that pang in his gut, the angel on his shoulder whispering in his ear...listen, listen. You sense a strange desire for self-reflection and belief in the words that John is telling him even when those words sting.

There's a compelling pull to truth even when it's hard.

But Herod is ultimately a deeply flawed individual. He makes bad decisions and at the same time wants to be a leader, a man of the people, who is admired for his wisdom and leadership. Yet, it's his desire for power, for all of those accolades, that gets the better of him. He stops listening to the angel on this shoulder and steals his brother's wife for himself.

This is where John steps in...he cautions Herod against his actions. He tells Herod the truth. What he is doing isn't right. It's not what God would want. For a moment there is a sense that maybe, just maybe, Herod will listen and do the right thing, ask for forgiveness, and course correct. However, Herodias, the wife in our story, is angry at John's persuasive teaching and creates a plot to kill him for interfering with her relationship with Herod. She has no intention of listening to the truth.

And so, when Herod throws a banquet, Herodias' daughter dances for him. Herod is so pleased at her talent that he offers her anything she wants. The plotting mother sees her opening and convinces her daughter to ask for John's head on a platter. It was the perfect plot for revenge.

Herod, upon hearing the daughter's request, is deeply conflicted. He admires John but his desire for public respect and to save face in front of his friends and colleagues is far greater. He orders John's death and you can imagine the gasp that goes through the room as John's head is delivered on that infamous platter.

John the Baptist, dead for no reason other than telling the truth. Herod, (I like to think) knows he has given up his integrity for adulation, his faithfulness for fanfare.

There is a lot to unpack in this story. But the one thing I keep coming back to is the repercussions of John's truth telling.

There are two reactions to the truth going on here...John who is willing to risk saying what needs to be said and Herod and Herodius who can't bear to listen to the one thing they need to hear.

It reminds me that truth telling is hard but truth-hearing is often much harder.

What happens when we are confronted with hard truths? Maybe about our perspectives. Maybe about our attitudes. Maybe about our choices and actions. Let me clarify, when I talk about truth telling I am not talking about brash finger pointing (that never works). I'm talking about the kind of truth telling that comes out of love. The kind of truth telling that arises from faithful people who want only the best for you and who want to show you a better way.

We have all been there. When we have gone down the wrong path, made mistakes. When everyone around us can see the dead end of our actions...except of course, us. It's when someone is bold enough to tell you...God wants more from you. You were created for more. God loves you and so do I.

Can you listen to those kind of truths? Can you acknowledge what God wants from you and for you...even when you are going down the wrong road...when you have broken someone's trust, hurt yourself and others, cheated or lied, denied the life God wants you to live.

When someone was brave enough to tell you the truth, were you able to hear?

Truth is costly. It's costly to have the courage to tell the truth. And, it can feel even more costly to hear the truth. But the reality is that if you can hear with an open heart and if you can put down your defensiveness, you notice that hearing the truth can lead to incredible paths of forgiveness and reconciliation. It can lead to happiness and wholeness, strength and integrity.

It can lead to the life God so desires for you.

Maya Angelou once said, "You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them." I take that to mean that we always have the opportunity to hear God's good news for us. We always have an opportunity to listen and respond with a desire to do the best we can with God at the center.

Herod was compelled to listen for a while. But when the hearing got hard, Herod took the easy way out. But by doing so, nothing changed. Nothing got better. The only outcome was more pain.

I would argue that we are hungry to change. It will just take the courage to listen to the truth. We know when we are wrong...deep down...in our gut. And yes, when someone acts as our truth-teller, it may cut into our egos a bit. It will certainly be humbling. But true life in Christ is worth our attention and our action. A faithful life, a life of integrity and purpose, centered on God, isn't always easy. And, it certainly isn't perfect. But it is receptive to listening and learning and growing...striving to live as God's beloved.

Take time to consider what you need to hear. How might God be calling you to change?

Amen.