



Hear the Word

from Pastor Paul E. Hoffman

Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send...

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

July 15, 2018

Mark 6:14-29

We have neighbors who never put their outdoor manger scene completely away after Christmas. It is one of those plastic ones, you know the kind. Joseph, Mary, and the Baby Jesus are all separate hollow-plastic painted figures about yeah-high with a single light bulb inside of them for the holidays. About Valentine's Day, they move them back closer to the porch and stop lighting them up, but they never put them completely away. Once lawn-mowing season begins, the Bethlehem trio gets turned toward the porch foundation wall. Somewhat hidden, tucked away.

It must seem odd and surprising to zoo-goers and joggers, baseball players and others who frequent 50th Street in Seattle to see the Lord and his parents in their Christmas best tucked away like that in these lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer. It certainly seems odd to me.

But no more odd than the way the writer of Mark's Gospel tucks this horrific story about John the Baptist away, folded in as it is to the mission story of Jesus and his disciples. Here's the first tuck: *King Herod heard of it.* The *it* is the missionary work that Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs to accomplish. Remember that from last Sunday? It's another of those text sandwiches that we've been getting from Mark in these early chapters of his Gospel. See how this story is tucked deep inside the mission story of Jesus?

The disciples cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.... Then today's story is sandwiched in, and then: The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.

It's got to seem a little odd and surprising to you, too, admit it. Certainly you didn't get out of bed this morning and just leap into your church clothes, rushing over here to hear such an unusual and haunting story about the demise of Jesus' cousin, tucked away like a summer surprise. It's an awful story. Despicable in its violence; unimaginable in its manipulation of human circumstances and emotions; abusive in its use of power.

But there it is. Like a manger scene tucked back against the house in the middle of summer, there it is.

...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.

Matter-of-fact despite its brutality. In just a few short verses, Jesus will be on the bucolic hillside feeding the five thousand. But for now, a different banquet is spread.

And maybe that is precisely the point of the Gospel story of Jesus. You just never know what is going to pop out and surprise us, interrupt the flow of all that is lovely and beautiful.

Children ripped from their parents and held captive on our borders.

Hardly a significant conversation any more that does not immediately turn into polarization, lacking even the most basic civility, even among long-time friends and associates.

Sometimes the surprise is this: that all that is simple, matter-of-fact and mundane in our lives just grinds on.

You just never know.

Which brings us to the very heart of the gospel promise. Jesus came to make possible for us more than mere survival, more than mere persistence, more even than mere success. Jesus came to help us to imagine that there is more to this life than we can perceive. Christ came to offer us not just more life, but abundant life. He came so that there could be a better ending to our stories and the story of the world than we can imagine or construct on our own. And when the drone of meaningless days drowns out any possibility of joy, or your marriage is stale, or you've lost your job, or you fear your child will never speak to you again... When you're pretty sure your friend has betrayed you, or you think you may just have screwed up the one relationship that meant something to you...then the possibility of another ending -- a *good* ending -- is, indeed, not just good news, but the best news. Sometimes, even when days are just ordinary, run-of-the-mill days, it can be a wonderful thing to know that God is ready to write a better ending to our story of us. A story that could never end at our hand as well as it will at God's. That's not just good news, either. But the best news. The very best.

Look who's in the room at Herod's brutal: Herod and his family, his courtiers, his officers and the leaders of Galilee. And look who's not: Jesus and his followers are out writing a different story of healing and life. They're caring for the sick and preaching the Good News. Herod's birthday story is one of the few stories in the Gospels where Jesus is **NOT**. **Not** present, **not** at the center, **not** seen or heard from at all.

No matter how much you look for him, he is not tucked away in some nook or cranny. Mark is cuing us that apart from God's presence, this is about all we can expect -- an awful story: despicable violence; unimaginable manipulation of human circumstances and emotions; abusive power. But as honest as Mark wants to be about the story *of* the world, he wants even more to testify to the story of God's great love *for* the world.

So right here in the middle of summer, Mark reminds us of the difference it makes when Christ *is* with us. Mark writes and the church serves up, in the most unexpected of seasons, a manger scene. An unequivocal promise that God has been born into our troubled world, that God is in the world. That the worst endings of our stories will not stand, but be amended by the love of Christ who walks with us, suffers alongside us, and then makes all things new.

There it is. Somewhat tucked away. But amazing and surprising. And good, good news. The best. In the name of the Father, and of the (✠) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.