



Pentecost 7-July 11, 2021

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Amos 7:7-15, Ephesians 1:3-14 and Mark 6:14-29

## “A Plumb Line”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen*

*Thank goodness, I have more than one scripture to preach from today. The reading that you just heard from Mark is as about as far from a word of gospel as you can get even though immediately after reading it today, I said, “The gospel of the Lord” and you responded with “Praise to you, O Christ.” Gospel means, good news and good news is hard to found in this story of accusations, sins of murder, adultery, the dancing of a young girl giving pleasure to a room full of male observers, a bratty girl getting her demanding wishes granted, a father who convinces himself that keeping the vow he made to his daughter is more important than carrying out the gruesome death of an innocent man, and then openly displaying of all these horrific sins for everyone to see and then have them recorded in scripture so that you can picture them in your mind as you sit in church today. This is NOT the gospel. And it is my vow to you that this sermon will not end until you hear the gospel of our Lord.*

*Outside of Jesus’ name being mentioned in the first verse of the reading for today, Jesus is absent in these words from Mark for today. Jesus was not absent from Herod’s mind, however. He had heard about Jesus from the preaching of Jesus’ disciples. Herod also likely knew about Jesus from listening to John the Baptist who was his friend, for a while anyway. John the Baptist’s calling was to prepare the way for Jesus. And John did so by preaching about repentance and Herod admitted that John’s preaching at times perplexed him, but he also admitted that he liked listening to what John had to say. Herod’s intrigue about what John had to say unfortunately never got to the point of **believing** what he had to say about Jesus.*

*If you drew a line separating verses 16 and 17 you would see an interesting transition that takes place. The reading begins by saying that the preaching of Jesus’ disciples triggered Herod’s memory of John the Baptist. What he was hearing reminded him of what John the Baptist had told him. Then in verse 17 we skip from what Herod was thinking about to his recounting of this terrible story of the beheading of John the Baptist. It is interesting how Mark who typically skips over details in his writings gives more detail than all the other gospel writers by recording every sordid detail in the murder of John the Baptist. We don’t know for certain why Mark felt compelled to do this, but one thing we can learn from this story lacking in good news is that times have not changed. The sins we hear about today were happening 2000 years ago.*

*The reality of complicated family relationships has not changed over time either. This is what caused the unfolding of this story in the first place. One thing Herod didn’t like hearing from John the Baptist was that he told him that it was unlawful for him to have his brother’s wife. Herod and Philip were half-brothers. Herod had been married to Phasaelis. He divorced her and Philip divorced Herodius. And to make the family tree even harder to trace Philip and Herodius had a daughter with the same name as her mother. So, the young girl who danced for the men at Herod’s birthday party was not only Herod’s niece, but also was his stepdaughter.*

*Mark reports that it was unlawful for Herod to have his brother's wife. The word "have" means that they were married to each other. This "have" is like the wording in the marriage vows that couples make to each other to "have and to hold". In this case, marriage didn't make the relationship legal. The taking of a brother's wife in this situation is clearly prohibited by Mosaic law. Herod didn't like hearing this and it becomes very clear that Herodius was tired of being reminded of their unlawful behaviors too.*

*Despite John the Baptist naming Herod's sin, but never repenting of it, Herod had still been protecting him. Who would have expected that a birthday party would give him an opportunity to finally put this unlawfulness to rest? This is where the scheming of mother and daughter Herodius comes in. The mother uses the vow that her husband gave her daughter as the perfect opportunity to silence the accusations of their unlawful relationship. And Herod might have felt good that he finally did something lawful by keeping the vow he made to his daughter.*

*You still haven't heard the gospel. In the first reading for today, Amos was shown a wall that was built with a plumb line and the Lord told him that he was setting this plumb line in the midst of his people. This plumb line he referred to was the coming of Jesus Christ who would raise the lowly and bring down the mighty. He would level the playing field. Jesus would deliver not one word that Moses delivered, the law, but Jesus would also deliver the good news of the gospel.*

*There is nothing in this story that is even close to being on the level when you compare it next to Jesus. While this so-called gospel reading for today has nothing to do with Jesus, the second lesson from Ephesians for today has everything to do with Jesus and what he will do for you. The reading from Ephesians tips the level from total unlawfulness to complete righteousness that is found in Christ alone. In a commentary that I listened to early this week about these texts, Dr. James Nestigan described the story about the death of John the Baptist as a story that dives to the deepest depths of Hell, but Paul's writing from Ephesians for today gives us a clear vision of heaven itself.*

*Paul declares in the second lesson for today that Christ has chosen you. He has chosen you before the foundations of the world were laid for you to be holy and blameless. Therefore Herod protected John the Baptist. He considered him a righteous and holy man. But then HE CHOSE to put John the Baptist to death. He also chose to marry his half-brother's ex-wife. He chose to watch the seductive dance of his niece/stepdaughter. He chose to honor the vow he made to his daughter rather than honor God's commandment. Herod's history of making good choices was few.*

*Paul opens the floodgates of the gospel by declaring that God chooses to adopt us as his children according to the good pleasure of his will. God adopts us by his pleasure not by who we choose to please. The good news doesn't stop there. Our redemption, our righteousness, does not come from what we do or fail to get done. Our redemption is through the blood of Jesus Christ which he does not dispense sparingly. Instead, as Paul says, he delivers forgiveness to us lavishly. This good news continues with us until the very day when time is no more and Christ who has already destined you to be his child comes and takes you home to live with him in eternity.*

*But, how do you know that this good news is for you? Because Jesus Christ has told you so. As Paul states, "You also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. This inheritance is yours just because you have heard about it.*

*Herod had heard about Jesus and had heard about what his disciples were doing. But Herod had not heard what Jesus could do for him. The law of Moses couldn't fix the mess that he was in. Killing the messenger of the law, John the Baptist, certainly didn't improve his chances of redemption. The only remedy for the law is the gospel. Forgiveness. Maybe our situations aren't as depraved as all that led up to the beheading of John the Baptist. But not one of us when compared to Jesus Christ who is the plumb line that is set before us has a chance of salvation on how we appear.*

*The gospel will be the final word for you today. Jesus Christ is the sure foundation for your salvation. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of your faith. Jesus has replaced all of your leanings away from Christ and made you as straight as a plumb line by forgiving your sins. **Now you have heard the gospel of your salvation. Amen***