

Text: With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of the divine will, according to God's good pleasure that was set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things into the Godhead, things in heaven and things on earth.

Is Herod a creep or what? John simply points out that it wasn't very moral for Herod to marry his brother's wife. So Herod tosses him in jail. Then, when his own daughter, Herodias, dances for him, he promises her anything and she, at her mother's prompting, asks for John's head on a silver platter. And here we come to the real ethical quandary that Herod had to face that day: on the one hand he had promised his daughter anything, and on the other hand he didn't want to kill John. Note that it wasn't killing that Herod found objectionable, it was the fact that he regarded John to be a prophet and thus revered and respected him. But, alas and alack, "out of regard for his oaths, and the guests, he did not want to refuse her." "*And the guests . . .*"? Can you imagine being at this dinner party? "Well, it is for you guests that I will have John's head brought to me on a platter." "Oh, Herod, you shouldn't have! How *thoughtful* of you!"

Actually, the oddest part of the story is that John was executed over a point of honor. Think about it. Herod had made an oath, a promise. So he felt he had no choice but to do as Herodias asked. And despite all my facetiousness a moment ago, this is not so odd as it initially sounds. Quite often we are in the position of having to choose between two demands, choosing between the lesser of two evils as the expression goes. To achieve some perceived good over here, we must commit some small (or not so small) act of evil over there. We can all come up with examples from our own lives. For me it was one time when I was only 11 years old. The neighborhood kids had formed a club, of which I was so proud to be a founding member. We all agreed that we would follow each other in all things, a majority vote binding on all of us. So when it was voted to steal from a local store, I felt I was obligated to participate. I had, after all, agreed in advance to the conditions. The only good part of the story is that we got caught. The club didn't last too long (thank God for small miracles).

The fact of the matter is, sometimes, like Herod, like me, like anybody, we find ourselves caught in a web of our own devising. With whatever good intentions, with whatever proclamations of fealty, with

whatever noble gesture we offer wherein we would sacrifice half of what we own, we can find ourselves facing a choice we never envisioned, an alternative that may ask us to violate what we know to be right and just and good. Herod's action, aside from its extreme nature, was so very *human*. Choices we never expect, quandaries we don't have the tools to cope with, results we never intend. Herod made his choices, I made mine, you have made yours. And so the saga of human life continues.

Now I would like to take this first portion of the sermon and set aside for a moment: let's just tuck it neatly off to the side and keep it in waiting. For the time being I would like to move in an entirely different direction, one which is dictated by Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Frankly, and I hope too many of are not disappointed in a minister for admitting this, but when I first read the lesson in preparation for this sermon, it bored me. It is nothing short of a tedious hymn of praise, going on and on about what God has done for us. Perhaps *bored* is the wrong word; *impatient* fits the bill far better. "I know, *I know already* what God has done for us, for me. Get to the real meat of the letter, Paul, and tell us what

it means to be Christian, about what we can be doing to help usher in God's reign of *shalom*." I think the reason for this impatience is that such a passage is not made for preaching. We ministers love passages that speak of feeding the hungry, forgiving our neighbors, standing against tyranny; passages that give us something to *do*. *Those* type of passages are truly wonderful, homiletically speaking, because with them you can create a "salad sermon." '*lettuce*' go forth and do as Jesus did.

With this passage from Paul, however, there's not a leaf of lettuce to be found. The whole passage focuses on something that has already happened, on something that no human being instigated, enabled, controlled or helped. This is a problem for a preacher and, I think, for lay people as well. We are all so *active*, looking for ways to improve our lot, deepen our spiritual lives, become involved in some noble end. America is the land of do-it-yourself-ers and Colorado has more than its share of such folk. From self-help to helping others, from working for our living to working on church committees, we are not a people who sit back and wait for something to happen to us, who wait for something to be done for us. *God helps those who help themselves* -- we swallow that theology hook, line and sinker. And my, it does tug us around a bit, doesn't it?

Please note, Paul's words don't even acknowledge all our hard work: Blessed be the God of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us . . . who chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world . . [who] destined us for adoption as children through Jesus Christ . . . and in whom we have redemption, . . . and forgiveness, . . . [who] has made known to us the mystery of the divine will." Note who has done all this. God. Note who didn't ask for our help. God. Note who did this all *for us*, and who blessed us and chose us before the foundation of the world ever stood, and never even asked our opinion. God. This is something out of our control entirely.

Also note what all this is for: our salvation – in other words our happiness, our joy, our communion with others and God, our eternal life. Here is the real kicker: *the single most important thing for every human being -- namely salvation, perfect love -- is completely outside our control. We are saved because God chooses our salvation; we are happy because God chooses our joy; we live eternally because God chooses to endow our humanity with the divine image.* In that entire passage from Paul there is not one mention of human activity, human accomplishment, human

endeavor. It makes the simple yet fundamental point that our salvation is a gift. There is nothing we did to earn it, and there is nothing we can do to lose it. It exists as surely as the air we breath and the ground we walk on. And for that, Paul gives praise. No salads here.

I remember reading of a young white student who went down south during the mid 1960's to march for civil rights. He wrote the following:

Back in the days of the Civil Rights Movement in the South, I well remember attending a march for civil rights in the Deep South. We students had gathered to march for justice, bravely to stand up and be counted, to demand that the government do something for the rights of black people.

But what was the first thing that the organizers of the march made us do? They made us gather in a hot, rural, black Baptist church for hours, endless hours of singing, and praying, and preaching.

"Let's get on with the real work of justice," we young, white activists said. "Let's get out in the streets where we can do some good." What did all this singing have to do with the matters at hand?

Patiently they reminded us that they had been at this struggle

much longer than we had. They told us that we were not contending against a few bad laws, a few bad people. We were struggling against principalities and powers, against cosmic evil. If all we had to sustain us out in the streets was superficial, optimistic humanism, we would not be out there long.

We came to see that we were there, in the church, to be reminded of Who had called us together, Who had sent us out to the battle, Who marched with us. We came to see that the most important, the most revolutionary act we could make, was to sing a hymn, to praise God and thereby believe, and thereby to act. Praise precedes Christian action, calls it forth, sustains it. We love (in the streets, at the office, in the home) because [first] we have been loved.¹

With all that said, I want to go back to Herod now. I think it is possible to understand more clearly his quandary of being trapped between two evil choices. I am going to make an assumption here: I'll bet that Herod was not a big participant in his neighborhood religious institution. You see, praise is vital to who we are as Christians, as religious people, simply as

¹Pulpit Resource, William Willimon, editor; Volume 22, No. 3.

human beings. For when we praise, we ground ourselves in love. When we worship we set ourselves upon stone. When our sole agenda, for however short a period of time, is simply to sing a hymn of joy, we become empowered -- empowered to hear the Word of Truth spoken, empowered to feel the presence of God internally, empowered to act upon the grace so freely offered. When we found ourselves in God we have a context from which to make a decision which is larger than simply offending dinner guests. When we know the Word, and the Word flows through us as an open channel of grace, moral conundrums lose their ability to force us to choose between the lesser evil, for we will not, cannot, choose any evil; we instead look for a different way. Had Herod been a person of praise he could have looked his daughter, his wife, his guests, and himself, straight in the eye and apologized for offering something, life or death, which was not his to offer. Had Herod been a person of praise he might have listened to John more and followed the way of repentance. Had Herod been a person of praise he could have had the strength of character to accept his own foolishness and not hide behind a imprudent facade of temporal honor. Had Herod been a person of praise

You know, like Herod we are faced with evil choices day in and day out. Like Herod we sometimes find ourselves trapped in a web of our own weaving. Like Herod we are tempted to choose the path we believe is dictated by societal norms and mores. Like Herod we are tempted to choose the lesser of two evils, . . . and thus choose evil.

But by choosing to sit in this church this morning, however, we have chosen otherwise. By choosing to raise our voices in praise and thanksgiving, we have chosen otherwise. By choosing to be filled with the strength that can only come from an act of praise, we have chosen otherwise. We will *not* give in. We will *not* allow the evil to define us and our response to the world. So we sing! We dare it! In the face of the evil, despite, and even because of all the bad news, we give thanks. Why? Because God is here, with us, shaping us, gracing us. Through the act of praise we become empowered to hear God's call and do God's will.

Today, this day, every day, take a moment for a simple prayer or act of praise. You'll be surprised how far you can go. Praise is enough. Amen and amen.

FIRST LESSON

Ephesians 1:3-14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him 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 is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

SECOND LESSON Mark 6:14-29

King 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." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." For 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. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for 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. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When 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." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask

for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." Immediately 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." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Perfect Truth, you invite all people to measure themselves and their choices by your loving desire for integrity and righteousness. Open our eyes to the ways we fall short of holiness. Call us to account when, like Herodias, we destroy others to preserve our own illusions. Call us to account when, like Herod, we bow before human conventions at great cost to our conscience which is your Spirit in us, seeking to guide and teach us.

Fill us with your truth, O Perfect Truth, and make your Spirit a beacon within us, a light to show us our flaws and failings, a light to show us our strength and our faith. Fill us with your desire for integrity and righteousness so that we choose to grow in faith rather than sinking to sin.

And on this morning, O God, we pray also for others: for all those on our joys and concerns list; for Trevor Davis as he deploys to Afghanistan; for our nation; for this entire earth and for all your creation.

Finally, O God, hear these prayers which thy faithful people gathered here offer unto thee, be they in silent or spoken petition: [SILENCE].

Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary; bless the dying; soothe the suffering; pity the afflicted; shield the joyous; and all for thy love's sake.

Hear these our prayers, O God, and those prayers so deep in our hearts that only thou knowest them.