

## GREENHILLS COMMUNITY CHURCH, PRESBYTERIAN

July 11, 2021 7th Sunday after Pentecost

### Sermon

*Don't Kill the Messenger!*

The Rev. Chris White

Let us pray: *Still within us all but your voice, O God. Use these words and our thoughts to help bring about your kingdom here on earth. Amen.*

- Remember watching old time westerns in which the bad guys wore black hats and the good guys wore white ones? It was always one way or the other – no grey hats!
- When hearing this story for the first time, we would most likely put Herod (and his wife and daughter) in black hats. And John the Baptizer in a white hat.
- Except in a western movie, the bad guy would be dead in the end and the good guy would live on.
- Here comes another one of my plugs for on-going Christian education. The advantage of becoming more mature Christians, is that we can look below the first layer of understanding and see what else there is for us to learn.
- Perhaps the real theme of this passage is the confrontation of political power and prophetic faith – with an underling understanding that since the players involved are humans – the people involved are more complex than just “holy” or “evil.”
- We humans come with mixed emotions, diverse thought processes, conflicting goals, and a wide variety of beliefs. This is certainly true within the key players in this drama.
- Light and dark, good and evil – are not only complete opposites – but a continuum along the way.
- So let’s take another look at the story from Herod’s point of view.
- He has a reputation to uphold – not just as a king – but a self-proclaimed god.
- That image requires strong and swift decisions. There can be no wavering, no indecision in the face of his public.
- And yet, we have hints that he is not the all evil ‘standard villain’ we might expect.
- We learn in verse 20 that Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, so Herod protected John. He listened to John and enjoyed pondering the perplexing message John delivered.
- In verse 26, Herod was “deeply grieved” to realize he was going to be backed into a corner and have to essentially sign John’s death certificate.
- Is it possible, regardless of who Herod was publically – or even to his immediate family – the Holy Spirit was working on him through John the Baptist?
- Herod might have tried to convince himself - as well as others – that he was infallible - but he was also human. With the mixed feelings and actions that come with being human.
- So Herod let his negative feelings overcome him – and he killed the messenger.
- The Holy Spirit is in all of us and helped to draw Herod to John and his teachings.
- That “still small voice” of God – wooing us to the authentic divine – needs to be nurtured enough to overcome any evil forces
- Perhaps as a child – while learning about conscience – you were told you had an angel on one shoulder, a devil on the other – to help us weigh our actions, determine which is correct. Hopefully, we would listen to the angel!

- And yet, even if we know what is “right” – it doesn’t automatically mean we do it, does it?
  - In Romans 7:15-19, Paul writes, 15I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... 19For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.
  - Unfortunately – Herod wasn’t able to address his perplexing thoughts with John’s teachings and warnings enough to allow his understanding to grow into a more positive realization of John’s truth telling.
  - For a myriad of reasons, Herod didn’t let John’s influence in his life to outweigh Herod’s desire for power and fame and the need for adoration and admiration.
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- Herod put himself into a tough position. It was going to be very difficult to please everyone around him and still uphold what personal standards he had or was developing.
  - He was at odds with his wife and with John. He had to continue in his role as strong King – and uphold a promise made in haste.
  - It’s human nature to care about what others think and to want to minimize any conflicts – and Herod made the decision to make his public image be more important than to have a regard for another man’s life.
  - When “push came to shove” – when the “rubber hit the road” – however you want to refer to that birthday party with its hasty promise and bluff – although Herod had the power to save John’s life, he was influenced more by guilt, self-interest, and pride than by justice and truth.
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- Who and what influences us?
  - John acted as he felt he was called – to be representative of God’s kingdom – an ambassador – a prophet.
  - As Presbyterians, we might refer to those who feel so called – as present day “members of a committee”!
  - We are a connectional church on purpose – because we know how easy it is for the Herods of the world to make bad faith decisions when left to their own devices.
  - We provide resources and education to help build our personal defenses against the evils of the world such as the love of power and money.
  - We remind each other that what God thinks of us is what counts – to not give into the need to be liked and admired by catering to the world’s opinion.
  - At the same time, we remember that evil can live within organizations – even within the church – because the church is, after all, made up of humans.
  - So we help each other stay as true to God’s Word as possible.
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- Now let’s look at the story from John’s point of view.
  - Perhaps John’s white hat might not have been all that white.
  - Even though John was called by God to be a powerful prophet, he was still a human being – with strengths and flaws.
  - He clearly had a message to deliver from God – and he delivered it!
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- Mark’s gospel begins with a glimpse into just who John the Baptist was.
  - John had a specific way of living that he believed was in line with what God wanted
  - His appearance and lifestyle had a certain amount of shock value. He wore rough clothing since most high priests wore linen and ate whatever was handy, with no regard for his own comfort or health.

- Like many of us humans, John was complicated.
- Mark's gospel introduces us to a humble John.
- Mark 1:7 says *"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals."*
- And yet, Matthew 3:7-10 shows John also being harsh, even arrogant, in his delivery .
- *7But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*
- John wasn't about to soften his urgent message to Herod with a zeal that often comes with being a prophet.
- He was very straight forward in warning Herod that if didn't repent of his sinful actions, God was going to be very unhappy with him – and no one wants that!
- And in that forceful delivery, John perhaps missed an opportunity to influence Herod in a positive way.
- John knew he had a message to deliver – and that's what he set out to do.
- John was influenced by his understanding of God and the world, his upbringing, his lifestyle – his devotion to living a holy life.
- All very different beliefs than that of King Herod.
- So who – and what - influences us?
- Over the months we've been together, I've often referred to "Christian Disciplines." Reading the Bible – and studying God's Word. Praying (even if it's not "without ceasing"!) Worshiping regularly, and of course, serving others.
- These practices help to allow God be at the forefront of our everyday lives - so that when God whispers in our ear – and in our heart! – God's voice is strong enough to overcome the loud drone of the evil voices of the world.
- Our daily devotions help build our defenses so that we are influenced by God's desires in all that we do and say. They also let us help our brothers and sisters in Christ also be strengthened.
- To be, in our own small – and mighty ways – a prophet for God.
- The Holy Spirit that lived within both Herod and John lives in each one of us. And the evil of a fallen world is still all around us.
- Let me end with a story from the Cherokee tradition: A young boy was speaking to his grandfather and revealed, "A fight is going on inside me. A fight between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, and ego."
- He continued, "The other wolf is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, truth, compassion, and faith."
- The grandfather replied, "That fight is going on inside all of us."
- The grandson thought about that for a moment, then asked, "Which wolf will win?"

- To which the grandfather replied, "The one you feed."
- Amen.