

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, AUGUST 15, 2021

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

**TWENTIETH SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME**

**GATHERING**

**PRELUDE**

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

One: How great you are, O Lord.  
All: **We come to celebrate your grace and goodness.**  
One: We come to claim your claim upon us.  
All: **We come to seek your power and presence.**  
Unison: **We come to worship the Lord our God.**

**\*OPENING HYMN** “God of Grace and God of Glory” GtG 307

One: God of grace and God of glory,  
All: **on thy people pour thy power;**  
One: crown thine ancient church's story;  
All: **bring its bud to glorious flower.**  
One: Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
All: **for the facing of this hour.**

One: Lo! the hosts of evil round us  
scorn thy Christ, assail his ways!  
All: **From the fears that long have bound us**  
**free our hearts to faith and praise.**  
One: Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
All: **for the living of these days.**

One: Cure thy children's warring madness;  
All: **bend our pride to thy control;**  
One: shame our wanton, selfish gladness,  
rich in things and poor in soul.  
All: **Grant us wisdom,**  
One: grant us courage,  
All: **lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.**

One: Save us from weak resignation  
to the evils we deplore.

**All: Let the gift of thy salvation  
be our glory evermore.**

One: Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,

**All: serving thee whom we adore.**

*(Public Domain)*

#### **\*UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**By your grace you have called us, O God. By your grace we confess who we are. The cry of those in need falls on our deaf ears. The dire need of the world is overshadowed by our petty wants and desires. We falter in your way and fail to heed your voice. We need you so desperately, yet we follow you so poorly. Forgive us, gracious God. By your grace, transform us. By your love, renew in us our desire for you. By your Spirit, remake us in the image of your Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.**

#### **\*SILENT CONFESSION**

#### **\*ASSURANCE OF PARDON** *(from I John 4)*

One: “In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent the Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven.”

**All: So rejoice and believe the good news of God’s grace: that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven, in Jesus Christ we are loved. Amen. Alleluia!**

#### **\*THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

**All: And also with you.**

*(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)*

### **THE WORD**

#### **SCRIPTURE READING** Mark 6:14-29

MARK 6:14-29 (New Revised Standard Version)

*<sup>14</sup> 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.” <sup>15</sup> But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” <sup>16</sup> But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”*

<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." <sup>19</sup> And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. <sup>22</sup> When the daughter of Herodias herself 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." <sup>23</sup> And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." <sup>24</sup> She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." <sup>25</sup> 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." <sup>26</sup> The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. <sup>27</sup> Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, <sup>28</sup> brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. <sup>29</sup> When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

## PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

### SERMON "Herod Among the Thorns" by Pastor Bill Vincent

The cast of characters is diverse.

John the Baptist: speaking out regarding something he knew to be wrong.

*For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."*

Speaking the truth to power, with courage and conviction, regardless of consequences. For as William Barclay notes,

**It took courage to rebuke in public a...despot who had the power of life and death.** (p.152)

And John had courage.

Do we know anyone like this?

Do we recognize in John others in our time? Others, who also speak out; who speak the truth, unpopular though it may be; who witness with their life, no matter how dire the consequences.

There is Herod: waffling.

*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.*

I was reminded of the Parable of the Sower: the seed in the shallow soil, and especially the seed among the thorns:

*these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing.* (Mark 4:18-19 NRSV)

Herod: impulsive, and tragically so.

*"Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it."*

Herod: easily swayed, influenced by peer pressure.

*The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.*

Do we know anyone like this?

Do we recognize in Herod others in our time? Others, who, in positions of power, are easily swayed by public opinion polls; who speak rashly and are caught by their own words; whose decisions and choices end up at the mercy of others.

There is Herodias: hateful, vengeful, and vicious.

*And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him.*

Eventually, in the end, she got her wish. With her daughter's help: a daughter who is just as guilty as she.

Do we know anyone like this?

Do we recognize in Herodias others in our time? Others, who lash out and cause harm out of personal vendetta; who wield power simply because they can; who twist the work and words of others to their own agenda and gain; who viciously crush, abuse, strike out at those who oppose them; in the political world or the business world or our personal world.

Of course, there are others: the guests at the birthday banquet.

They do not speak a word, but they are there: silent witnesses to gruesome events. And simply by their presence they exert influence...especially on Herod, who

*out of regard for his oaths and for the guests...did not want to refuse*

the request for John's head on a platter.

Do we know anyone like this?

Do we recognize in the guests others in our time? Others, who also witness gruesome events in our day and age; who simply by their presence and the power of their voting block exert influence, even if that influence be in silence.

Do we know anyone like these various characters?

Do we recognize in them others in our time?

Do we recognize *ourselves* in them?

Maybe we're not John the Baptist, who stands out and stands up in front of all the rest, full of courage and conviction.

Though hopefully sometimes we are.

Maybe we're not Herod, vacillating, torn, perplexed, easily influenced and manipulated to poor choices and perhaps even foul deeds.

Though maybe sometimes we are.

Hopefully we're not Herodias, plotting revenge and despicable evil.

Though, regrettably, I fear sometimes we just might be.

Maybe, more often, we're the guests: those invited to the party who witness the drama, seeming non-participants, yet...

If so – if we are more like the guests – we still have a part to play.

-Do we stand up for the John the Baptists, support and encourage and even side with them?

-Or do we taunt the Herods, jeer at them and pressure them to do the evil into which they so foolishly blunder?

-Or do we simply stand idly by, silent, while Herodias gets her violent way?

During the tumult of the 1960's, much was made on the American political scene of the "silent majority." What did they think? What did they believe? What did they support?

No one knew, because they were silent.

Is silence consent? Is silence dissent? Is silence indecision? Is silence apathy?

Is silence dangerous?

Martin Niemöller is known for his statement about the rise of Nazi power in Germany:

**First they came for the communists, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.**

**Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.**

**Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew.**

**Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me.**

(from Wikipedia)

Will we speak out?

Will we lift up our voices like John the Baptist, to call for repentance, a turning around to a new way, a better way, a more just and merciful way?

Will we lift up our voices in support of those John the Baptists around us?

Will we lift up our voices to decry the Herodiases of the world who plot and plan their self-indulging power plays?

Will we lift up our voices to sway the Herods of the world who may need but a voice in order for them to say 'No' to foolish evil?

Yes, to lift up our voices is risky. John lost his head over it.

And sometimes that's all we see.

We can hear this story and see that risk and get trapped in a tunnel with blinders on, where all we can see is a conniving Herodias, a complicit Herod, acquiescent guests, and John's severed head.

And we despair. What's the point? Why try?

This story serves as a caution: there are consequences to the choices we make; following this Jesus is risky; the cost of discipleship is not cheap.

But not only does this story serve as a caution.

This story itself deserves a caution.

For this story is not the whole story.

Remember: Jesus' disciples are still on the road, preaching and teaching and healing – the word is getting around. And John's disciples have the courage to claim his body.

For all

**Herod's grim participation in John's murder** (Chuck Aaron in *Lectionary Homiletics*, June-July 2006, p.62)

Herod cannot stop God's work.

In a way, Herod acknowledges that himself:

*But when Herod heard of Jesus, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."*

Of course, Herod was wrong...in more ways than one. He was wrong to behead John, no matter his oath. He was wrong to allow himself to be manipulated by Herodias. He was wrong to think he could silence John's message.

But he was wrong about Jesus, too.

*"John, whom I beheaded, has been raised,"*

he said.

No.

But take that same idea, transport it however many months down the road, and he would not have been far off.

Maybe Pilate had the same thought when the followers of Jesus – who should have been squelched and scattered with his crucifixion – began to demonstrate tremendous courage, incredible conviction, unexpected energy.

I wonder: did Pilate ever hear rumors of what the post-Easter, Pentecost-empowered disciples were doing, and say to himself, "Jesus, whom I crucified, has been raised"? He would have been right...in spite of himself.

Pilate could not stop what God was doing.

Herod could not stop what God was doing.

What God was doing – in John, in Jesus, through the disciples, through us – is risky.

It is risky to be a part of what God is doing: proclaiming self-giving love in a world bent on focusing only on itself.

There are risks.

Jesus *did* say, "Take up your cross." He did *not* say, "Take up the easy chair."

There are consequences to the choices we make.

There is also conviction and encouragement. For God's work will go on – God will go on – and God will help us go on, if we will go on with God.

The Herods and Herodias of the world may be able to do terrible things.

But God can – and will – do things even greater.

And in that divine drama, What part will we play?

### **\*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**In life and in death we belong to God.**

**Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,**

**and the communion of the Holy Spirit,  
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,  
whom alone we worship and serve.**

**In a broken and fearful world**

**the Spirit gives us courage**

**to pray without ceasing,**

**to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,**

**to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,**

**to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,**

**and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.**

**In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,**

**we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks**

**and to live holy and joyful lives,**

**even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,**

**praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"**

**With believers in every time and place,**

**we rejoice that nothing in life or in death**

**can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

*(from A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)*

### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

**THE LORD'S PRAYER** (Traditional)

**Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name,  
thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power, and the glory,  
forever. Amen.**

**OFFERING**

*Invitation*

*Reflection*

*\*Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**We sing of your blessings and know of your goodness, O God. Thank you for the wondrous bounty you shower on us and the wondrous good works you do in our midst. Help us to respond with joy and thanksgiving, giving of ourselves to you and your work in the world. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.**

**SENDING**

**\*CLOSING HYMN** "The Church of Christ in Every Age" GtG 320

- 1. The church of Christ in every age,  
beset by change but Spirit-led,  
must claim and test its heritage  
and keep on rising from the dead.**
- 2. Across the world, across the street,  
the victims of injustice cry  
for shelter and for bread to eat,  
and never live before they die.**

3. **Then let the servant church arise,  
a caring church that longs to be  
a partner in Christ's sacrifice,  
and clothed in Christ's humanity.**
  
4. **For Christ alone, whose blood was shed,  
can cure the fever in our blood,  
and teach us how to share our bread  
and feed the starving multitude.**
  
5. **We have no mission but to serve  
in full obedience to our Lord:  
to care for all, without reserve,  
and spread Christ's liberating word.**

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**\*CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Pastor: ...And let the gathered people of God say...  
People: ...Amen.

**POSTLUDE**

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