

July 11,2021

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Based on Mark 6:14-29 and Amos 7:7-15

Agitate!

I have to admit that when I first looked at the gospel story for this morning, I thought, "What the heck am I supposed to do with this? It is really awful and not at all uplifting." I think we will be surprised at how relevant this story really is for us today, and how this fits together with our story from Amos.

This is a story that is familiar to us. It is sandwiched by the writer of Mark, between the story of Jesus sending out the 12 Apostles to preach the word, and the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000. King Herod Antipas has heard about Jesus, and people wonder who Jesus is. Some people believe that he is a prophet, like there used to be earlier in the history of Israel. Some people believed that he is Elijah, who was supposed to come back just before the coming of the Messiah and the redemption of the World. Herod thought that Jesus was John the Baptist resurrected. The issue of the identity of Jesus would have been important to Herod as well as to us. If Jesus was like one of the old prophets, then perhaps he could be neutralized more easily dealt with. If he is Elijah, then the end of Herod's reign is near. And if Jesus is really John the Baptist, then Herod is dealing with the unknown. Herod apparently has a problem, because Jesus is already reminding people of redeemer figures from the Hebrew Bible.

This story is not only mentioned in the gospels, but also by the historian Josephus. He was a Jew who fought against the Romans in the Roman Jewish War, in the 60's and early70's of the First Century. Then he was captured and switched sides. According to Josephus, Herod killed John the Baptist because John had a large following, and Herod was afraid of what might happen (thinking that this could lead to a rebellion).

According to the version in Mark, John had been speaking out against Herod because he is in an adulterous marriage - he has stolen his brother's wife. This is more political than it might sound to us, for two reasons. First of all, a good Jew like John and many others, would see the rule of Herod (or any other allegedly Jewish king) as illegitimate, if he is in such blatant violation of the Torah. This is much like we might view a government as being illegitimate for violations of human rights. (For the record, violations of human rights would have been against the Torah as well.) The other reason is that Herod's first wife was the princess of what is now Jordan. Her father went to war with Herod, because by divorcing his first wife, Herod was breaking a peace treaty with the other king. Herod lost the war, and John's preaching could have created an uprising not only in Galilee, but also cause Jews living across the Jordan river to join in the military campaign against him. Therefore, this matter was not just personal picadilloes as we might assume.

Herod has arrested John - and Mrs. Herod wants to kill John - but Mr. Herod will not let her. Strangely, he protects John. Herod fears John. One translation said that Herod

was in awe of John. That Herod knew John was a righteous and holy man, but Herod keeps him prisoner. He likes to listen to John, and the scripture says that he is perplexed. Basically, we see in Herod a person who lacks the courage of his convictions. He knows what is right. He knows that he is in the wrong and that John is right. Herod is accustomed to being a dictator, to getting his own way. Herod has not had to cope with real life. This is an adjustment for Herod.

The story goes on to tell us that one day “an opportunity came,” which is a very interesting way to put things. Herod had a birthday, and gave himself a birthday party. According to my research, celebrating birthdays was not a Jewish custom. For Herod to give himself a birthday party, is an indication of how Hellenized (Greek instead of Jewish) he really was. Herod invites his hangers-on (who symbolize the Roman establishment in Galilee) and then his niece dances for him. We know her name as Salome, according to the historian Josephus. Also, according to modern historians that I have read, a girl of her station would not have danced at a party. It would have been beneath the dignity of a princess. However, this may just be another detail in the story of how Herod is not a good Jew.

Herod swears an oath to his niece, that he will give her anything that she wants, even up to half of his kingdom. He is trapped by his oath and wanting to not go back on his word in front of all his guests. This is a parody of how elites are seen to make decisions, trading in human lives in order to save face, which is both evil and allows them to be easily manipulated. Also, yes, the feminists are right again, in that the women are largely blamed, as well as the easily manipulated Herod, for what has happened. The writer of Mark has created a political caricature of those in power, and adds to the tradition from the Hebrew Bible of prophets speaking out against arrogant kings, and foreshadows the death and burial of Jesus.

Amos has a different story with a similar moral. In the book of Amos, there is a list of countries that have committed crimes against humanity - war crimes - and God will take vengeance against them for what they have done. Amos is a farmer from Judah (the southern kingdom), who goes north to the kingdom of Israel, in order to preach to them the word of God, that they need to change their ways. Amos says that God has told him that the kingdom will be destroyed for its evil deeds and social injustices. Amaziah, who is the priest to the king, Jeroboam tells the king that Amos is speaking out against him. Then Amaziah tells Amos to “go back to where he came from.” He tells Amos something I have been told since I was 15 years old, “Go back to Russia”. (Never mind that I do not happen to be Russian.) Amos responds that he is no prophet, but only a farmer who has been told by God to go preach to the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Amos was an “outside agitator.” John was an “inside agitator.” It really does not seem to matter whether you are an “outside agitator” or an “inside agitator”, people are not going to like what you have to say, when you speak out against social injustices or any other kind of evil or problem. Those of us who speak out need to persist regardless. You might notice that the Bible is not full of praise for examples of people who refrained from speaking truth, in the face of adversity. The scriptures do not remember fondly those who decided that “go along to get along” was the course to take. Adversity is a part of doing God’s work. It reminds me of some of the advocacy that I have done for peace. If

you speak out in times of peace, people will say that there is no need for you to speak out now, because there is no war. If you speak out in times of war, you are seen as being too late at best, and a traitor at worse. So, my best advice is that you cannot win, in the sense of pleasing other people. You might as well do what is right and say what needs to be said.

I think that one thing that people need to keep in mind, is that like I said the last time that I preached here, many of the issues that we see as partisan politics would be better understood as humanitarian issues. It is really a travesty that issues like police brutality, racism, and gun violence are being seen as partisan issues. The need to speak out is very real.

It absolutely is not a matter of God being on somebody's side. God does not take sides in a partisan sense, but God does take sides in the sense of being on the side of peace against war and violence. God does take sides in the sense of being on the side of love against hate. God does take sides in the sense of being on the side of brotherhood and sisterhood, against any kind of bigotry towards anyone. God does take the side of justice against people going to bed hungry at night. To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, the question should not be whether God is on our side, but whether we are on God's. If people do not like this, then maybe they need to realize that neither I nor anyone else who speaks out on issues today wrote the Bible. And those who do not like people speaking out, need to take it up with those who did. Good luck.

The interpretation of Christianity that is only concerned with saving souls, ignores the pain and suffering in this world. It is like what Martin Luther King said, "Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and women, and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them, is a dry as dust religion."

The interpretation of Christianity that is only concerned with the saving of souls and where we go when we die, is unbiblical. It completely ignores the teachings of the Torah, that are concerned with issues of poverty and human rights; the prophets of the Hebrew Bible who spoke out against the injustices of their day; and finally, Jesus who is depicted as feeding people, healing people, and also speaking out against injustices, like the prophets who went before him. Ninety years ago in Germany, that other worldly interpretation would have ignored the rise of Hitler, for fear of rocking the boat. Problems were allowed to fester, and look what happened.

So speak out, even agitate when you must. If you are on God's side, then you will be doing God's work. Agitate for peace, agitate for love, agitate for brotherhood and sisterhood, agitate for full bellies. However, it is important to remember that needing to speak out does not only apply to social and political issues, but also to things like problems in the work place or family. There can be problems in the work place, such as toxic environments, sexual harassment, poor pay, bad work schedules etc. These are problems that may need someone to speak out. Families can also need the voice of reason from time to time. Even healthy families go through their ups and downs. I remember one of the best messages that Pastor Dave Schackle gave, was about how we never know what problems people might be facing in their families, behind locked doors. Immediate or extended families may need someone to say things that need to be

said, even though no one wants to say them. The need to speak out against problems can apply to issues both big and small.

So go ahead and be an “outside agitator”. Go ahead and be an “inside agitator”. Agitate about a problem in your family, your job, or society. People need your help. As I may have said before from this pulpit, pick a cause and run with it. People who agitate for the right reason, and in the right way, are doing God’s work. If you agitate, you will be in good company. Because the Bible is full of people who did. Amen