

Where's the Good News?

July 12, 2009

the Rev. Karen Millard
2 Samuel 6:1-5; 12b-19
Mark 6:14-29

This week I have been moved in a way I didn't expect to be moved.
I have been convicted in a way I didn't expect to be convicted.
I experienced the gospel in the most unexpected of places.
I saw light in a place that I am almost afraid to say I saw light.
But I'll dare....

You see, I was in my office on Tuesday morning and I went on-line to read my email and the opportunity to watch Michael Jackson's memorial flashed across the screen. Now, its times like these that I realize I have some real advantages in my job. I decided to finish setting up my office while I watched. In my mind I was making justifications if someone walked into the church I would have likely quoted Karl Barth the great theologian who said "Every sermon should be written holding the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other."

But in all honesty I wanted to watch because I was a huge fan of MJ when I was young. He was in his prime as I entered my teens. In fact I even had a friend in 7th grade who wore a single glove to school almost everyday for a year. It was Michael Jackson who taught us to sing wholeheartedly. We would listen to his music and sing and dance and perform for one another. In fact Michael Jackson sparked many of my friend's desire for their musical careers.

Now I know just admitting this has got some of you a little concerned. And believe me I know that as a person who has worked with children and families who experienced abuse I likely should be demonizing the man. But, as has been said over and over we don't know all of the truth and although I will not lift him up as a saint I do believe he was a man who searched and struggled and sought to do his best like many of the rest of us. As MLK Jr. III said quoting his father "In life one must discover what their calling is" and Michael Jackson did just that for in him... lived a great entertainer who did his job well." But let's be real. I didn't watch the memorial expecting to hear from preachers and teachers. I did not watch the memorial planning to be spiritually touched; I began to watch out of curiosity and fan-ship.

So, I was shocked by how I was moved by the speeches, and the music. I have not been able to get out of my mind all week how over and over I learn God often uses the most broken of us to heal this world. This isn't the first time I have learned that. I learned that when I worked with foster children and street kids, addicts and women fleeing abuse. I watched as these people in crisis cared for one another and taught me so much even in

their grief and despair. The struggling often support one another in a way many of us who are privileged do not. Retta told me a story this week of a moving time of ministry here when Daniel did a memorial for a woman who had taken a toxic dose of drugs that killed her. Retta recalled the church being fuller than she had ever seen it. As a minister I can almost guarantee that day was one of the most powerful days for not only those who attended the memorial but for Daniel as well. It is often shocking where we will see God most present in life and ministry.

Now before I go too far I don't want you to hear me saying I think God puts us into distressing situations so that he can be seen. I don't believe for a moment God desires for us to suffer. Rather I believe God reveals God's self in the most unexpected places that we might see the Holy present in all of creation. For I do not believe there is a place that God does not seek to shine. Oh there are places where we don't want to let God in. There are situations that are created that are so dark God can't be seen. But God is there, and if the light was allowed to break into those situations we would see that.

Look at King David. Here we have a man who God has called to power who has forgotten that he didn't get there on his own. David's motives in the text we read are not entirely pure. He is moving the ark into the city to put God back at the center, but in doing so he overpowers the temple leadership. He is sacrificing to and praising God while he dresses like a priest entering the city with thousands of followers that he might be honoured in the land. He comes in dancing with a parade making a great spectacle. And so it seems this politically wise move also increases his authority in such a way that the city becomes known as the "city of David."

David's life and leadership is filled with the kind of scandal that makes HBO special series. And yet somehow God is always involved. Somehow through this proud man people meet God and are transformed in life and faith. One commentator offered. "The agency of God is messy. David's motives are not pure and yet somehow God uses *them*."¹ David's sin is real and David's faith is real.

In today's gospel reading we read of another corrupt King. Herod has gotten caught up in political power in such a way he feels he can no longer be faithful. People are talking about the power of Jesus and he is concerned. Jesus after all has become so well known that even the king has heard about him. People are wondering if in Jesus "Elijah" has been raised, but Herod is intensely concerned that it might be John the Baptist.

Scripture tells us Herod had imprisoned John because he was preaching against Herod's immoral practices. Still Herod knew John was righteous and he liked to listen to his wisdom and teachings. Most likely Herod just wanted to scare John a little – remind him who is king. But when Herodias dances for Herod and he promises her anything she desires he feels he has no choice but to behead John, after all it is very important to keep your promises. And he had promised Herodias anything she wanted, and she wanted

¹ Sermon brainwave July 12, 2009

John's head on a platter. It seems Herod had begun to make wrong political, leadership and life decisions and he now he found himself trapped, unable to lead in freedom and he ends up killing a righteous man just to save face.

Why would Mark want us to hear this story? This all seems like bad news. Jesus was not welcomed by the people, and the prophet John was not either. Most of the commentaries speak of how the death of John foreshadows the death of Jesus. How both are rejected for their righteousness and killed by authorities because of their political and religious power. Both of them were killed by the order of leaders who felt trapped in their political position.

Catherine Taylor suggests we need to have our eyes open. She says "We might be more like Herod (*and Pilot*) than we think, attracted to the holy but not changed much by the association. If nothing else, this disturbing story reminds us that it's terribly easy to dis-member our faith in order to look good in front of our peers, or at least not risk standing out. By the same token, we decapitate what we say we believe in when we compartmentalize it into a Sunday ritual that has little or nothing to do with the rest of our lives."²

Taylor has a good point and I have to admit I wondered when I first read this week texts how I was going to pull any good news out of them. If I hadn't strayed from the lectionary several times already I would have freely done so today. The Rev. David Ewart says perhaps there is no good news here. "And this is precisely Mark's point. Just in case we are getting too excited and thinking this business of being a disciple of Jesus is going to be a piece of cake, is going to be a story of ever increasing fame, miracles, and wonders, Mark gives a story of a good man being executed because of weakness, capriciousness, and vengeance.

It's as though Mark is saying to us:

The world is a dangerous place. Not only might you get killed for proclaiming the Good News, you might not even be honourably killed - killed in a direct, open confrontation. Instead you might be killed by stealth, and for totally shameful and trivial reasons.

The moral of this story then might be:

Proclaiming and doing the Good News of God is not about ego, fame, or honour; nor is it a heroic quest. Our death may come because of totally unrelated, trivial, silly reasons.

Proclaiming and doing the Good News of God is simply about humble service - regardless of the "achievements" or the ending."³

Now although I think there is some truth to David's reflection, it makes me wonder than why would we live as if we believe there is good news. Wouldn't it be easier to just shelve ourselves in such a way that people look at us and think well that's a nice enough

² Rev. Dr. Catherine Taylor – Sermon Nuggets – Lindy Black – textweek.com

³ David Ewart, "Holy Textures" July 8, 2009

person whose done some nice enough things. She didn't cause any tension or raise any alarms. Wouldn't it be nice to be one of those books with the pretty cover that people keep on their coffee table but no one ever really reads?

Or wouldn't it be easier to become disillusioned and despairing and recognize David was corrupt, and Herod was corrupt, anyone with power and authority, fame or fortune is corrupt and God can't even be seen anymore. It would be easy to go down that road, and I think most do...

And yet what about these facts?

David is the one who saved a nation from the destruction of the philistines, and who lead many successful battles, who was honoured by God. And David is also the one who wrote many of the psalms we read, and sing and pray with to this day. God is not limited in such a way that she can only use the most holy to reach our souls.

And then what about the fact that it was the arrest of John the Baptist that sparked the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He could no longer be silent Mark 1:14 says "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'"

And what about the fact that after the horrific death of John, Jesus went to the dessert to pray and in that place thousands followed him in their grief and despair and there in their physical and spiritual hunger their souls were feed in the event of the feeding of the 5,000.

What about the fact that I and millions of others (I've read the blogs) were moved, touched and reminded to be faithful, kind and giving as we watched the memorial of a celebrated, honoured, ridiculed, criticized, idolized, talented, addicted person who is recorded as having been the most charitable giver in music history. Dare I echo Bernice King who said Michael's life brought the world together in true sister and brotherhood?⁴

Is the message of today's scripture be aware doing what is right wont always be easy? You might even be killed or at least die from the stress of it in the end. Perhaps that is a part of the truth, because unfortunately in our humanity we tend to follow the way of greed, popularity and fortune over sacrifice, giving, and humility.

But I think the good news that we find in today's scriptures is more likely the fact that God uses even the broken to heal this world. That the Holy Mystery is so beyond our limited understand of righteousness and truth that God can use the most unexpected circumstances and people to shine light in the dark. If God can use a man like David or Herod or even Michael in their complex some times dishonorable lives how can God use

⁴ King, Bernice July 7,2009 Michael Jackson Memorial Service

us? If God can turn what is broken into a healing presence what can God do with us? If God can turn a tragic life and death into a blessing what can our creator create out of us? What is our good news to share?

May we long to discover how God longs for us to share the good news in this world.

Amen