

The Big Picture (11July21)

Mark 6:14-29; Ephesians 1:3-14

We'll come back to the killing of John the Baptist, but let's start with Ephesians. The version Jan read tries to shorten phrases and clarify (and also adjusts gendered language for God), yet I suspect it was still kinda tough to follow. The original Greek has these whole dozen verses as one great big run-on sentence. We'll sort through some complexity momentarily.

But I also want to say I don't usually like Ephesians. It claims to be written by Paul and a lot of what makes people not like Paul comes from Ephesians, but it wasn't really him. We've got six more weeks of hearing from it, but the lectionary manages to dodge the nastiest stuff about how wives are underneath their husbands and slaves should obey their masters. That's not Paul's understanding of what God wants for our households or our relationships.

But for the bad of Ephesians, I have to admit this passage today has really good stuff, if we can sort through and find it. You can pick the goodness out in phrases: Before the world was created... you were chosen... in God's mysterious ways... and Christ will bring together everything in heaven and on earth... fulfilling God's plans.

It's super big picture stuff, beginning before the creation of the cosmos, and leading to God's intentions for the fullness of time, which eventually will sweep up everything—all things, seen and unseen. It is such a big picture that it overcomes anything else, or redeems it to be brought back into the frame of God's picture in Jesus.

To rephrase some of it: Your trespasses are rendered faultless. God's organizational structure or desire is revealed in Jesus as an odd and mysterious path not of power over but life with, of love. The things that would oppose this way will be brought into line. So oppressive systems and destructive tendencies must somehow be redeemed in love and headed toward Jesus.

Holding all time and space, the entirety of the cosmos and beyond, this is big stuff, while also as small as your household and life. Both the word

cosmic and our word for economy or ecosystem are in this reading. In times of wildfires, hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes, mudslides, heat waves, ocean die-offs, climate change, burning rain forests, groundwater contamination by manure or PFAs, etc. etc. (besides all the good stuff of a beautiful summer morning), it is incredible to think that somebody could say that Jesus' death and resurrection have potential to encompass "all things." And that you yourself are held in this big mysterious plan that will bring everything together. It's probably both too enormous and too nebulous really to comprehend.

So let's return to the death of John the Baptist and simply consider characters in the story, since if Ephesians is true and all things hold together in Christ and are summed up in him and brought in to the purposes of his work, then that has to include all this difficult stuff.

For fitting into the story of Jesus, we start most easily with John the Baptist. He was the forerunner. In Matthew's telling, the very first public words of Jesus were an exact repetition of the first preaching of John, both saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

John evidently continues that message in today's story, even willing to speak truth to power and stand up to the king and tell him he needed to reform his behavior. Such a daring pursuit of justice or confrontation with authorities might align with the plan and purposes of Jesus.

And yet, when John's head ends up on a platter, we need a bigger explanation and fulfilling vision. It's not enough to have been courageous and morally upstanding while he lived only to end in tragedy. Then Ephesians' ultimate vision couldn't be true.

If there is hope and there is victory in Jesus and something that comes together in the fullness of time, then God's intentions must be more than getting killed for trying to do right. There needs to be redemption.

More, that can't just be for John and John's unfortunate death. If there's redemption, it also needs to be for Herod. This Herod is Herod Antipas. His father Herod the Great's violent

tendencies were embodied in a story of trying to eliminate the baby Jesus by killing all the male infants around Bethlehem. Herod the Great, in fact, routinely murdered members of his own family, worrying they would try to take his power. And he used that power largely as an egotistical sycophant, in trying to copycat the Roman emperor.

This son, Antipas, managed to escape being killed by his father and to continue his trend, like naming yet another capital city after the emperor. It's not his politics criticized in today's story, but rather that he took his step-brother's wife, who also happened to be his niece.

Still, it is Herodias who seems to take more offence at the critique of the relationship. Herod may have the power to imprison John, but it's she who wants him executed.

If Jesus is working cosmic-scale reconciliation and forgiveness and somehow setting things right, it has to include those who seem so opposite of God's ways, like Herod and Herodias. If Jesus' love can do anything, it really needs to do it to them or for them.

Maybe that brings us to the dancing daughter. This story is most often portrayed with rotten stereotypes as an erotic dance with her seducing her inebriated step-father, who crumbles under her feminine wiles. That might not be out of the question for this family, but it might also say something about lecherous male interpreters and their disparaging views of women.

See, this might also be a little girl. The other times Mark uses the term, it's for 12-year olds, like the one to whom Jesus said "*talitha cum*; little girl, get up." Maybe this daughter had a tap routine she learned and she's cute as a button as she does it and really nailed it this time and Herod is just bursting with pride and enjoyment. If Herod needs to fit into Jesus' eternal picture, then it does us no good to caricature him as a demonic villain. And this girl, whoever and whatever she is, needs to fit in, including if that's one who was innocent and trying her best and caught up in the trap of corrupt and violent systems.

They all need to fit. They need to have their story not remain in these few verses of the Gospel

of Mark, but be brought toward a larger future, in which we are all joined together, all saved. In all of our corruption and errors and hurtfulness. In all of the problems we created or couldn't escape. In the things that seemed huge at the time, and the things that quickly disappear into the mists of history, the headline harms and the small injuries that are forgotten except to the lone victim, the rare perpetrator.

And you. You may or may not identify with any of the details of Herod and John and a dancer and intrigue. If that's not your story, that may feel good. But that doesn't mean you aren't caught up into Jesus' story. You have been chosen, since before the creation of the cosmos. Through all the ins and outs of your extremely small existence, with your biggest faults and your grandest achievements, you are held in the much larger embrace of forgiveness and love and guarantee of adoption into God's holy family, promised an inheritance with God's loving plans and purposes for you and for all things.

As we live into that promise, we here and now proclaim and in our own small way practice this reconciliation: The peace of Christ be with you always.

(Ephesians 1:3-14, NSRV—Nick Special Re-done Version)

Eulogized and praised is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in Christ has eulogized and praised us with all spiritual blessings in the divine realm, just as God chose us in love even before the creation of the cosmos to be holy and faultless in the presence of the divine, ordaining us as adopted through Jesus Christ, according to the pleasure of God's good will, to the acclaim and honor of God's gifts which were given to us in the Beloved One, through whose blood we are set free, forgiven our trespasses, according to the abundance of his gifts, of which he has more than enough for us, and so with all wisdom and reason the mysteries of God's will have been made known to us by the good will of God's intentions, in the economic order of the fullness of time (the way the

ecosystem of God's household is organized), is that all things would be summed up in and headed by Christ, all things in the divine and earthly realms, and in him all things were chosen and ordained for the purposes of his work and the plans he wanted, in order for us—the original hopers in Christ—to be acclaimed for his honor, in whom you heard his word of truth, the victory message of your salvation, and in whom you had confidence, affixed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance for freedom as God's own people, to the acclamation of God's honor.