

Sermon – Mark 6:14-29; Ephesians 1:2-14  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
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“Destined for the Kingdom”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” This sentence begins Tolstoy’s masterpiece, *Anna Karenina*. I have no idea what the second sentence of *Anna Karenina* is, because I’ve never read it. I’m still recovering from reading *War and Peace* a few decades back and, at the risk of starting a literary melee, that book didn’t leave me wanting more Tolstoy. Give me Dostoevsky all day long. Of course, having made this confession, I’ll probably have to give *Anna Karenina* a read. But even without having read the book, the opening sentence popped into my mind early this week as I read and reflected on our gospel passage for the day. Whether or not happy families are all alike, the Herod clan is most certainly unhappy in its own way. And what a disturbing unhappiness it is.
2. Following last week’s passage, detailing Jesus’ rejection in his hometown and the subsequent sending of the twelve, Mark gives us a flashback to a state dinner. Herod Antipas, the petty despot *du jour*, is celebrating his birthday. His family is with him, and what a family! He is with his wife, Herodias, who had been married to Herod’s half-brother, Herod II, who also happened to be Herodias’s own half-uncle. Following Herod II’s removal as heir, he and Herodias divorced, leaving her free to marry Herod Antipas, who was divorced from Phasa’el. Got all that? So anyway, at this party, Herod Antipas (we’ll just call him Herod from here on out) sees his stepdaughter, Salome,

dancing for him. And he is so *pleased* that he promises to give her anything she wants. Even half his kingdom! The girl goes to her mother for advice. Half a kingdom? That's nothing compared to the opportunity to enact some good old vengeance. How about the head of John the Baptist, on a platter no less, for having had the audacity to speak against Clan Herod? Happy families are all alike, but the Herods? They are unhappy and messed up in a way that's all their own. And because such people often wield an unfair share of power in this world, others are caught up in and ground down by their unhappiness. John the Baptist, obviously, but also the multitudes who suffered under their cruel reign as puppet monarchs in service to Rome.

3. Last night I was eating tacos in Northbrook with Anders and his teammates, celebrating a win and a tie in their two games yesterday. And yes, when you get out of a last inning jam with the game tied, the bases loaded, and nobody out, you celebrate that tie. While the boys talked about whatever twelve-year olds talk about over tacos, our phones all started buzzing at the adult table. Which is why the remainder of this sermon got rewritten late last night. Reports started to come in from Pennsylvania, an incident unfolding at a campaign rally. The news began to clarify. An assassination attempt had been made against former President and current candidate Donald Trump, leaving him bloodied but safe. In the wake of this, this sermon went back to the drawing board. But to say what? Other than to give thanks that the attempt failed, and to lament the lives that were lost, to say what?
4. I'm not sure. It would be unwise to draw too-direct lines from Herod's life to our own situation, except, perhaps, to say this: We have always lived in a world in which violence and power are attracted to one another, the results of which are never good. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. As for families, so for nations. We have become a people uniquely unhappy. Fractured and divided, yes, but to say that simply points to disagreement. But we seem to be teetering, at times, on the edge of an abyss. Whither do we

look for hope? To hate? Violence? Fearmongering? Or is there another way forward?

5. Last night, I woke to the sounds of the epic thunderstorm that blew through around midnight. Perhaps you were awake, too. The lightning lit up our windows as the rain came down in sheets. Provided one is someplace safe, there is something cleansing about such storms. For while God has promised to never again wash us away in the waters of a flood, God does draw us into deep baptismal waters of cleansing and rebirth. I was reminded, and perhaps you were, too, that the God who claimed us in the floodwaters of Grace, who joined us to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is a God who is not done yet, whose will cannot be undone by this world's power and violence. This God, our God, makes a way.
6. Herod (you know, Antipas) would later become friends with a guy named Pontius. They bonded over the casual use of state violence, getting rid of Jesus because he was inconvenient. But this was not the end of the story. Violence and death do not get the last word. Christ has been raised, and in him all petty tyrants are put to flight, tails tucked between their legs as they flee with the also-defeated cosmic forces of sin, death, and the devil. We discover in the rising of Christ that violence has been undone, both in act and rhetoric, replaced with grace and peace. Once bound within this unhappy human family, we are adopted into the household and family of God, children of the same heavenly Father, siblings together in Christ. The pledge of this inheritance is sure and certain. Whatever befalls us here, the Kingdom is ours forever.
7. In this rewritten sermon, my mom gets to make an appearance. In her later years, we would, with fair frequency, receive packages from her. Sometimes she'd send us little toys and trinkets for the kids. Sometimes there'd be a real gem, a token of times past. And sometimes it seemed like she was just

cleaning out a junk drawer, aided and abetted by the postal service. We'd laugh as we looked through the contents, never knowing what to expect. I miss this weird mail. And as I think about it, I think my mom just wanted to share what she had while she was alive to share it. She could have left it all as part of the inheritance we'd receive after her death. She, I think, saw these packages as part of a living inheritance to be enjoyed ahead of time, as it were, pledges of the fullness that was to come.

8. And so it is for us in his broken world. We serve a living God. We worship Jesus who, although he was dead, is now alive, reigning in glory. We are filled with the Holy Spirit, the giver of life. In this world where power seeks power and violence begets violence, this peaceful pledge and promise of life is ours. And it's not just waiting for us on the other side, but is gifted to us now, showing up on our doorsteps in surprising ways. And we can live like it, turning our backs on hatred and violence, turning our hearts toward one another to seek a different future. And perhaps that's what I rewrote this sermon to say: I don't know what awaits us in the days to come. But I know that you are God's own people, and that the reign and rule of Jesus Christ cannot be undone. You, dear friends, are part of God's family forever, and he has not promised half a kingdom. You, reconciled to God and to all people, get the whole thing. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.