

Spiritual Blessings in Christ

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ^[b] before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance,^[c] having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this^[d] is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

The Death of John the Baptist

¹⁴King 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." ¹⁵But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

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

July 15, 2018

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

“What Do You Do with the Mad that you Feel?”

Kerra Becker English

What a soap opera! And this soap opera is inserted between the stories in Mark’s gospel of the sending out of the disciples to heal the sick and cast out demons and their return to listen more to Jesus’ teaching by the seashore. As Mary Ann Tolber phrases it in her commentary written for my study Bible, “The almost whimsical nature of the events that lead to [John the Baptist’s] gruesome beheading portrays a level of evil that is chilling in its pervasiveness.”

I will tell you too that I tried, really tried to read another commentary’s segment on the family tree that connects King Herod to his brother Philip’s wife, Herodias – who I’m sure got her name from already being associated with the Herod clan. Herod’s multiple marriages to both relatives and political alliances IS a soap opera, and I have never had the patience or the ongoing time commitment to connect all the dots of daytime television. Suffice it to say – it’s complicated. The relationship he has with his wife and his daughter was the kind that was obvious fodder for the scorn of religious leaders and the punchlines of their followers. He and his wife are related – at least two ways – one of which is as a sister-in-law – BEFORE they get married to each other.

So, John the Baptist calls out the weirdness. He tells Herod – to his face – that it’s not lawful for him to marry his brother’s wife. Societies have established rules and taboos about such things – often for good reason. How John the Baptist was popular enough to be granted access to the King, I don’t really know. But what we do know is that his comments made Herodias spitting mad. She held a grudge against him and wanted him killed. It makes me think there might have

been more to the story than just that comment about the law. John the Baptist was embarrassing to the King and his power. Maybe he was preaching all the time about “family values” and how they weren’t being upheld by those in high places. Maybe John was trolling the royal family on whatever passed for the social media of that time. Maybe Herodias felt insecure in her ascent to power and couldn’t stand it being questioned by anyone. She would have killed him with her own bare hands if she could have, but she didn’t quite have that power. Only her husband had that power, and he was protective of John. He was fearful of killing someone who was so obviously a good and righteous man, and because he was a man of many followers as well. It wouldn’t look good for the King to kill such a popular preacher.

But then, in overly dramatic fashion, we already read what happens next. Herodias seizes her opportunity to ask for a favor that her husband can’t refuse because he made a promise in front of some powerful friends, and that favor then includes arresting, binding, imprisoning, and beheading her enemy – John the Baptist. Her anger leads to hate, which leads to scheming, which leads to using her daughter to complete her crime – as a result of her husband’s drunken birthday wish. It’s truth that reads like fiction. With three of the four gospels corroborating the story, and outside sources citing it as well, there’s no dispute, John the Baptist was beheaded, and he was killed because King Herod’s wife didn’t like the things that were being said about her. Chilling. Evil. Horrible in its consequences, and so very human in reading about how it went that far.

Anger. It’s an emotion we all have from time to time. Someone talks about us in a derogatory way. We feel slighted or disrespected. Someone cuts us off in traffic or a close family member forgets our birthday. We probably could name a few people in our own lives who have felt like enemies. We know that deep belly angst, the kind that makes our blood boil, and gets us

twisted up in a thousand different ways. Sure, we could blame the messenger (in this case John the Baptist). What business did he have meddling in other people's family affairs – even if they were obviously pretty horrendous? But what genuinely concerns me is how anger, the kind of anger that Herodias had, gets played out. We've all seen it – when we come home mad from work and yell at somebody at home – or in the news when an angry young male takes a gun to school.

But it's not having anger that's the problem, it's what we do with it that makes all the difference in the world. Interestingly enough, one of my favorite lessons on anger comes from a song from Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. He sings, "What do you do with the mad that you feel when you're feeling so mad you could bite? When the whole wide world seems Oh so wrong and nothing you do seems right?" I love his simple brilliance. He knew that even very young children have intense emotions – anger in particular. When we feel out of control with anger, he asks, what are you going to do about it? That's a great question – one we don't often ask. Grown men with anger are told to punch it out or shove it down. Grown women with anger are told they are either being too sensitive or acting too aggressive. All of those stereotypes start when we are young, and our parents or caregivers want to control those emotions we associate with negativity. It's bad to be angry, so we aren't taught much about what to DO with it.

People with extraordinary power, like kings and queens, or anyone who molds themselves into being treated royally, are especially dangerous with an emotion like anger. Herodias' anger was enough to get John killed, simply because she had the power to make that request. Anger that turns to rage can be deadly for the object of the anger. The disproportionate consequences of anger from the powerful upon the powerless – in abuse situations – continues the cycle of emotional and physical violence. These cycles of anger can be held in families, in

religious organizations, or expressed in national policies. The anger of a person in power can channel the anger of the populace into the destruction of groups with less power. We have to remember that and not allow it to be a repeating historical pattern. What will we do with the mad that we feel? Offsetting it by blaming others isn't ever the best idea – this story being the case in point.

But there are alternatives. Mr. Rogers started with young children by giving them the power over their anger. He told them in a song that they could control it, use it, stop it – at any time they wanted. They could punch a bag, pound some clay, take a run. He told them that it was great to be able to stop, to stop from doing what's wrong and do something else and think this song. What a gift! And the really extraordinary thing is that this song rises up straight out of Fred Rogers own anger at what was happening in children's television. Cartoons were violent. Children's shows were slapstick. He was mortified that throwing pies in people's faces was something that children were expected to think was funny. These early shows didn't honor the emotional strengths of children and it made him spitting mad. And yet he turned his anger into a solution, into a children's show that did everything backwards from the way children's television worked at the time and it ran longer than 30 years, and inspired children for decades to feel loved and cared for by someone through the magic of the TV screen.

Anger, when it comes out on behalf of justice, of righting the wrongs in the world, can be one of the most powerful emotions that we have. There's a group of grandmothers organizing to care for children on the border because they are ANGRY about how immigrant children are being detained. Ashland leaders got creative with solutions about the crime and poverty in our area hotels when people got angry about how we weren't successfully prosecuting the crime AND simultaneously caring for the poor. They were getting lumped together. Anger is often the

impetus and the power behind changing corrupt systems. You don't have to bite – Mr. Rogers tells us – but there are things you can do when anger is welling up inside you.

Kinda makes me wish that Herod and his court had a bit more training on how to deal with criticism. Kinda makes me wish that we had better lessons on how to read and respond to the comments in social media. Kinda makes me wish that we would get angry about television again, about the ways in which the news sources play upon our anger to get wider distribution of their ideas and stories. It still makes me nervous when people in power seem quick to anger, and when their followers are so quick to defend violent or punitive means to gratify that anger in vengeful ways. God's anger, and we can find instances of God's anger in scripture, is always directed at the violence, at the manipulation, at the ways in which the powerful stomp on the powerless.

Jesus didn't seek revenge when his friend John the Baptist was beheaded. He grieved. He cared for those who were grieving. And his power came directly from not fighting back, from the resistance he showed by continuing to preach and teach just as John had done, knowing absolutely that he would be next. That's exactly how Mark writes this drama. In the middle of success – the disciples going out to teach, and heal, and cast out demons, THIS. This happens. And Jesus keeps on keeping on. And Herod, though he will try to stay out of it, will end up being part of the collusion to kill Jesus too.

As much as I wish we could completely create a different world, my suspicion is that we will always have anger and power wedded to each other in such a way that we will see tumultuous violence – whether in our small circles or our larger ones. And yet, we can be the quiet game changers. We can sing with Fred Rogers. We can offer healing with the disciples. We can follow Jesus, not the Jesus claimed to be on the side of the powerful and violent. Empires

have been co-opting Jesus for their own purposes starting pretty early on with Roman influence. No, not that Jesus. We can follow the Jesus who gets angry at the right things and stops himself from responding to violence with violence.

It's hard. I know. Anger is a difficult emotion, and one we are not taught to live into all that well. But I'm reminding myself to ask the good question, "What will you do with the mad that you feel?" What will I do? Because I can do something. I don't have to freeze my anger and let it consume me from the outside in. I can use it to motivate myself to doing even more good in the world. Thanks Fred. You keep on teaching us as children. Thanks Jesus for being the unexpected Messiah who changes the world – one step, one person, one life at a time. Amen.

May God bless us with **discomfort** at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deeply and from our hearts.

May God bless us with **anger** at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless us with **tears** to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, hunger, and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with enough **foolishness** to believe that we can make a difference in this old world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done, like bring justice to the oppressed and kindness to all.