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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

July 11, 2021

Year B, Proper 10, Track 2, Revised Common Lectionary

[Amos 7:7-15](#)

[Psalm 85:8-13](#)

[Ephesians 1:3-14](#)

[Mark 6:14-29](#)

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There's a consultant named Peter Block who tells a story about power. He was working with a supermarket chain, and the local managers told him they couldn't get anything done because the regional managers wouldn't let them. He met with the regional managers and they told him their hands were tied by headquarters. He went to headquarters and kept being sent up the chain of command until finally he met with the company president, Mr. Hilliard. Now, he figured, he'd get somewhere. Then Hilliard started telling him about all the ways he was frustrated and blocked by everyone else in the organization ... including the people below him. His crowning woe was that the ketchup in his own company cafeteria was too thin and watery. It was their own store brand, and every day Mr. Hilliard had to go and eat in that cafeteria and use that bad watery ketchup. And from his perch at the top, he couldn't figure out how to get anybody to change the formula. Every single leader in the organization felt frustrated and blocked—by each other.

I think of that story when I think of Herod. Except that the story of Herod and John the Baptist is much darker. The cost of Mr. Hilliard's dysfunctional system was watery ketchup and sinking profits. The cost of Herod's dysfunctional system was a prophet's life. And of course John the Baptist wasn't the only person to die under Herod. And there are other costs we see in this story. The women, both named Herodias, mother and daughter, stuck in a toxic system where sex, manipulation, or both are the best chance at power they have. The soldiers, forced into atrocities by following orders. Even Herod himself—not that we should feel too sorry for him—but there's a deep sadness about his own stuckness, the way his grandiosity and pride constrain him too to do what he would rather not do, to give the orders to kill a prophet whose words touched him at some level, to snuff out the part of his own soul that yearned to listen to John and just maybe turn to God.

It's a story that recurs over and over in human history. The details are different. I think of what happened three years ago with the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, probably at the orders of someone high up in Saudi Arabia. I think of the Russian dissidents and activists who have been murdered, or almost murdered, by gunshots and poison, probably at the orders of someone high up in the Kremlin. Sometimes it's the person on top who ends up as the victim, as with the assassination we saw this week in Haiti. But more often it's the person on top taking out their own existential dread or generational trauma or sheer malice on someone else. Which might seem like an exercise in freedom, and instead is a sign of profound imprisonment. Imprisonment by the forces of brokenness, cruelty, fear—imprisonment, in Christian language, by the power of sin.

And it doesn't always mean something as spectacular as killing. It's the same dynamic in every situation of abuse, whether of a partner, or a child, or an elder, or a subordinate. From wars and genocides on the large scale to everyday bullying and minor interpersonal cruelties on the small scale, all of us suffer the effects of life in a world where sin is a reality. Violence begets more violence. Abusers often begin by having been abused. To some extent we have free will and are responsible for our choices; and yet to some extent we were set up to make those choices because we came into a world already marked by these patterns of behavior. This is what Christians mean when we say humanity is in bondage to sin.

Jesus came among us as a prophet. A successor to John the Baptist. Herod even thought he was John come back from the dead. And of course the same thing happened to Jesus. That dysfunctional, cruel web of chains of human power swept him up as it did John, and for the same reasons: because like John, Jesus came preaching a different way. A way of turning away from evil and toward God. A way of repentance and simplicity and mercy. A way that feels threatening to those of us with some measure of wealth or status or security, and full of hope to those without. The story of Jesus' crucifixion isn't identical to John's beheading, but the two stories rhyme: prophet speaks uncomfortable truths to power; power is intrigued, yet horrified; maybe not without some reluctance, power does what power does, and the sordid story of human violence goes on.

Except with Jesus, something different happens. Power gets turned upside down by a different power. Jesus is raised by the power of God. And God's power is not about violence, but about life.

Herod defeated John the Baptist. But who's had the greater impact on human history? Pilate defeated Jesus. But how many followers does Pilate have today? Not that worldly success is the measure anyway. There have been martyrs whose names we will never know, who have no one to weep for them and whose conquerors got to write the history. And if regular power is all there is, then those conquerors really have won. But Christ is risen. God is real and living and active. And if Jesus is alive again, then so too in him is hope for every other prophet and martyr.

In C.S. Lewis's famous children's book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the powerful White Witch kills the Christ-figure, the noble lion Aslan. She's entitled to do it, the book says, because of "deep magic from the dawn of time." And that seems to be the end of Aslan—except that the next chapter Aslan is alive again, a chapter called "Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time." And we might say that just as Jesus was killed by the deep power from the dawn of history, so he was raised by deeper power from before the dawn of history. The kind of power Martin Luther King referred to as "soul power." A moral and spiritual power that often loses in the short term but that is destined to win the whole universe in the end.