

**The Rev. Devon Anderson**  
**Proper 10B; Mark 6:14-29**  
**July 11, 2021**

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I imagine that when you registered to attend church this morning you were not expecting to hear a Gospel story quite like this one. Who needs thriller or a mystery novel read on a beach when you can come to church and hear a story full of sex and violence, betrayal and lust, jealousy and intrigue? Looks like church just got a lot more interesting.

At the heart of this morning's Gospel is King Herod, by all accounts a man with a shopping list. He has stolen his brother's wife, Herodias, and married her. He has imprisoned John the Baptist because John is the only one with enough chutzpa to tell him that stealing your brother's wife is against the law. Then Herod throws himself a lavish birthday party, (maybe because he doesn't have any friends who like him enough to throw one for him) during which he puts forth Salome, daughter of Herodias, to dance in a slinky costume. This is especially creepy because Salome is both Herod's niece and his stepdaughter. Salome's dance so arouses Herod that he tells her he will give her anything she wants, even half his kingdom. Salome, prodded by her mother, who is furious at John for reminding her that her marriage is a disgrace, asks for John's head on a platter. The request is granted. The story seems to end, as John's friends carry his body away.

But as so often happens in Gospel stories, the story really begins at its end. Herod and his court are ruminating about this man Jesus. They have heard stories of his miracles throughout the countryside. They are debating who he is, and how he might have come by these powers. Different theories are batted about; but Herod thinks he knows who Jesus is: John the Baptist, back from the dead, back from the beheading that Herod himself ordered. This statement – confession, really – reveals the more serious and spiritually relevant component of the story, lingering just below the surface of the noisy plot: and that is *Herod's fear*. Through the thick of swirling dancers, illegal marriages, and devastating injustice is a cowering, unbridled fear – a fear that sets in motion every aspect of the story.

How ironic. Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, larger-than-life ruler of all Galilee, enjoying wealth and pedigree, great power and the fear of his subjects. Herod can do whatever he wants and have whatever he wants. Yet, he spends most of his life attempting to control a fear so powerful and consuming that it drives nearly everything he says and does. Herod is afraid of being criticized in public, so he locks John up. Afraid of being embarrassed before his court, or losing his marriage, so he grants the outrageous request that costs John his life. But most importantly, Herod is afraid of John himself – of what he preaches, what he represents. He is attracted to John, like a moth to a flame, recognizing something holy and significant. Herod doesn't understand John, but there's a part of him that understands the power behind his words. Following what John preaches, following this man Jesus, would just cost Herod too much. Herod can glimpse the dream, but it just can't fit into the fortress

Herod has built to protect himself. In the end, Herod's fear earns him no glory, no safety, no comfort: only shame, confusion, and moral poverty – a life shut down and ruled entirely in a cramped and tiny room inhabited only by his own perceptions and paranoia. Herod's fear has bought him a life absent of connection and relationship.

It's a big factor for all of this, fear. We're not so different from Herod, in that our fear (and I'm not talking about anxiety disorders or mental illness – just your garden variety, persistent, keep-us-up-at-night worry) is a pervasive presence in our lives. Because there *is* a lot to fear! But Herod is our patron saint of what happens when we give our lives over to it – when we give our fear free reign over our every dream, hope, and possibility, when we hand over – whether consciously or unconsciously -- unfettered access to our lives and relationships.

One of the things we experience if we hand our lives over to fear is: regret. Several years ago, conducting research for a book, Dr. Tony Campolo conducted a sociological study in which he asked 50 people over the age of 95 the question, “If you could live your life over again, what would you do differently?” Three answers dominated the results of the study. If they could live their lives over again, they would: 1) reflect more, 2) risk more, and 3) do more things that would live after they were dead. When we hand our lives over to all-consuming fear, we risk arriving at the end of our lives not having lived full lives – lives absent of, as we pray sometimes on Sunday morning, “risking something big for something good.”

Another catastrophe of fear is: missing out. In her celebrated book, “The Painted Drum,” Louise Erdrich writes: “Life will break you. Nobody can protect you from that, and living alone won't either, for solitude will also break you with its yearning. You have to love. You have to feel. It is the reason you are here on earth. You are here to risk your heart. You are here to be swallowed up. And when it happens that you are broken, or betrayed, or left, or hurt, or death brushes near, let yourself sit by an apple tree and listen to the apples falling all around you in heaps, wasting their sweetness. Tell yourself you tasted as many as you could.” No amount of fear, worry, of the delusion of self-protection will shield us from the brokenness, hardships, and heartbreak of living. It just won't. Fear is seductive that way – it masks itself as the thing that protects us from harm, keeps us aware of what might potentially hurt us or those we love. But in reality, it closes us down, shuts us off from living, denies us the sweetness that living offers us, over and again.

And, even more starkly, if we succumb to fear's evil and manipulative ways, we cannot be the church. We cannot fully live into the Gospel, into following the teachings of Jesus as faithful disciples. This past spring, I read Bishop Steve Charleston's latest book, “A Light in the Darkness,” in which he reminds his readers: “People who need hope cannot see us if we are bent over with worry. They cannot find us if we are hiding from conflict. They cannot join us if they cannot see what we are doing. As people of faith, we must take the risk of being visible. Even if our hearts are heavy we must stand and be counted. Each one of us is a sign someone else is searching for. We are the inspiration they have

been needing. Our role is often nothing more than being present, visibly, actively present in reality. Not offering sympathy from a distance but offering a hand up close and personal. It is not always easy for us to do. It takes courage and commitment, but consider this: who do you remember seeing standing tall that touched you in your own life? Who moved you by doing nothing more than being seen to do the right thing? And why have you remembered them all these years?"

I'm just back from six days up in the Boundary Waters. Knowing that there was a sermon to give at the end of my holiday – before I left, I spent some time with this morning's Gospel, and pulled together some resources to consider on the topic of fear. I took up north with me this quote from Bishop Charleston's book – and thought a great deal about his question – asking myself who, in recent memory, demonstrated courage and commitment, who has stood tall by risking something big for something good? I thought a great deal about Trinity's Vestry. And yes – they are who I would raise up for us this morning as the persons who have, for me, stood tall, moved through fear toward courage and, ultimately, faithfulness.

It was at this time last year, just a few weeks after the George Floyd murder, just a few months after the descent of pandemic that cast us all into our homes and forever on-line, it was this time last year that the Trinity Vestry decided to hire an interim Minister for Children and Youth – not only to sustain programming through pandemic, but also to lead us in a process of inquiry and discernment around the future of Trinity's ministry to and with children and youth. One of the many losses of pandemic was that the Vestry had recently completed the "Listening Links" process – a parish-wide discernment of identifying the values most deeply held by the parish – and was busy preparing for an all-parish meeting to report back on what the process had revealed. The meeting was cancelled, of course, as our world stopped and everything shut down. Still, the Vestry persevered, knowing that "ministry to children and youth" was one of two top priorities, one of the most deeply-held, cherished values of our parish community, as revealed through the "Listening Links" conversations. Our Interim Ministry for Children and Youth constructed a "Transition Task Force" who did a deep dive into Trinity's history around children's and youth ministry and how God was calling the parish to move into the future. In the Spring the Transition Task Force presented its findings to the Vestry, summarized in a detailed, meticulously researched report: Trinity's community is called to a robust, integrated ministry for children and youth, to be led by a full-time staff member dedicated entirely to working with the congregation to bring about this vision.

The Vestry struggled mightily in response to the recommendation, at first spending quite a bit of time with fear, which, as we learned from the Transition Task Force report, is deeply, deeply engrained in our Trinity DNA and history. We've been running the same tapes for a very long time -- we're not big enough, we're not cohesive enough, we're not financially solvent enough, it's not the right time, we don't know who we'll be in 3-6 months, the parish isn't ready, we don't have enough kids. Wisely, the Vestry leadership let this initial response run its course, and then moved the group to a deeper, more discernment-focused place. For several weeks the Vestry focused their conversations exclusively on

two, what I like to call, God-questions: 1) to what is God calling Trinity Church? and 2) how will we respond to this call (acknowledging that there are many paths to a following a call). The Vestry did its discernment work – making space to listen to each other, to disagree, to allow all perspectives to be heard. In the end it affirmed the Transition Team’s sense of call: God is calling Trinity to live as deeply as possible into its relationships and ministry with children and youth. The path the Vestry discerned for itself was to hire a Minister for Children and Youth sooner rather than later.

For me, both participating in and watching this process was a spiritual experience of moving through fear to promise. And that’s what courage is, really – not the absence of fear, but the ability to move through it, move past it, deny its ultimate claim on our choices and decisions. The fact is there’s still risk involved – huge risk. And those initial fear-based concerns are still unanswered, unsettled, undetermined. But for me, the Vestry fixed its gaze on God, and on Jesus, and on call and on baptismal promises. The Vestry cast its lot with the strength, love, and commitment of Christian community, and on faith: God will give us what we need to follow the call we so clearly hear. The Vestry made decisions that, God willing, will have lasting effect, that will live on in the list of our now-children and youth long after we’re gone. The Vestry chose to delight in the sweetness of apples – and taste as many as they could.

And also, moving through fear has something to do with letting go. In her new book “Trusting the Gold,” mindfulness teacher and psychologist Tara Brach tells a story about Ananda, the Buddha’s attendant and deeply devoted disciples. After the Buddha’s death, when the great council of his enlightened followers was planned, Ananda was not invited. Although he had worked at it strenuously for years, he himself was not yet enlightened. And so on the even of the council meeting, Ananda sat down to meditate, determined to practice vigorously all night, not stopping until he had attained full enlightenment. But after many hours, he was only exhausted and discouraged. In spite of all his effort, there had not been even the slightest progress. Toward dawn, Ananda decided to let go of striving and simply lie down and rest awhile. As the story goes, the moment his head touched the pillow, he was enlightened. What freed Ananda? The release of all striving. Letting go. Simply resting in presence.

In our Christian lexicon, letting go is about trusting in God. When we can’t do this – when our fear grips us and constricts our heart and our courage of all its air – theologian Parker Palmer calls “functional atheism”: *nothing good can happen unless I do it*. But we forget about God, and God’s promise to be with us, every moment of every day, to be with us and for us in the raising up of each other, of the church, of goodness and love and ministry and the Gospel in our church, in our families, in our communities, in our world. *The God who is behind us is greater than any problem or fear that is ahead of us*. Good News, indeed. **Amen.**

**Sources:**

Eric Burtness, *Leading on Purpose: Intentionality and Teaming in Congregational Life*, p. 81 (Campolo study of people over 95).  
Tara Brach, *Trusting the Gold: Uncovering Your Natural Goodness*, p.121.