

Apparently, Jesus' new strategy hasn't quite worked out. It was only last week that he sent his disciples out in pairs to spread the good news, showing people the kingdom of God in "full color" - casting out demons, anointing the sick with oil, curing them. He knew that the biggest barrier to people getting the message was himself so he sent the message with the disciples, distraction free! But it didn't work: King Herod missed the message entirely and honed in on him - even with all the work of the disciples, Jesus' name became known.

There begins our gospel reading.

And an unusual reading it is. Jesus is only mentioned once, right off the bat, and the rest of the story is about what has already taken place (a flashback). This is the story of John the Baptist's murder, and we receive it from the man who did it - Herod. With this simple statement of confession we descend with Herod into his worst fear - that John, whom he beheaded, had been raised.

But is this story about Herod? There are lots of reasons we might think so. For starters, it's all about his actions. Also, we learn a lot about him. For instance, we learn that he is easily manipulated (John was arrested for speaking out about the unlawful marriage of Herod to his brother's wife, Herodias - she didn't like John and made Herod act). We learn too that he was a fearful man, afraid of not only John but what Herodias might do. And we learn that he is ruled by vanity: Rather than go back on his word in front of his very important friends (rash as it was, grieved as he was) he finally gives Herodias what she has been after - John's head.

But this is not a story about Herod. This is a story about the man he killed - John the Baptist.

John, the cousin of Jesus (the man who baptized Jesus) knew Jesus. But more than this, he knew the way of Jesus.

I have little to back up that assertion, mind you: Mark doesn't give us much on John. Other than this story, we only hear in the first chapter that he "appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." This forgiveness of sins is a big part of what Jesus is proclaiming, and a big reason powerful people don't like him. Proclaiming God's forgiveness is dangerous work, and it's work to which both Jesus and John have been called. It was a call to proclaim good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, liberty to the captives and release to prisoners. To make the mountains low, raise every valley and make straight the way of the Lord. It's a call that puts them both in direct opposition to the powerful; for John, King Herod and his unlawfully wed wife.

But John (like Jesus) refused to be silent in the face of these worldly powers, despite knowing exactly where this course of action would lead. He could have saved his life by shutting up, but he refused. Perhaps the truth he spoke over the baptism of thousands (including Jesus), **that death was not to be feared**, gave him the conviction to follow his call to the end. After all, it was a forgiving God, a merciful God, who was calling him. As later with Jesus, it was a call to die.

What do you think of that? Am I way out in left field here? Why else would John refuse to save himself? God called him, as different a man as he was from Jesus, to walk that same path and find a similar fate (We see after all a reflection of Jesus' own death in this account of John's: The death of Jesus and John goes against the wishes of those in power over them - Herod and Pilate, respectively). But more to the point, is this call of God to both John and Jesus not also God's call to you? To us?

Nadia Boltz Weber speaks truly when she says, “there’s just not a huge market for the message ‘**Jesus bids you come and die!**’” She sees that when Jesus says “follow me” to his disciples, death is what he calls them to. Are we not disciples of Christ? Does Jesus not call us also “to die”?

There are lots of other voices at work in discussions of what God in Christ calls us to. Voices that say to follow Jesus is to fight for moral values, or to make America Christian again, or to swell the ranks of *young* families at church. Often these voices are not the voice God, but our own.

We know from experience that to follow Jesus leads us to our neighbor, especially those in need (Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger...). To follow Jesus points us squarely toward those who are suffering, for this is the path he walked all through his life (casting out demons, healing the sick, etc.). In the words of our previous Presiding Bishop: “Because we are marked with the cross of Christ, it means the movement of our lives will always be toward people who are suffering, toward the victims of injustice, toward those who are dying... not away.”

Arguably, this is a central, even defining, statement of what it means to be Lutheran. It's Martin Luther's theology of the cross - the idea that God is present though hidden in suffering. Luther maintained that God who seemed so absent at Jesus' death - "My God, why have you forsaken me!" - was there, hidden in Jesus on the cross: With Jesus on the cross, in the face of his suffering, beyond all hope, God remained. If we put any stock in Martin Luther's understanding of the Christian faith (and I believe we do) it's worth wrestling with the idea that God's call to us is to follow Jesus to the crosses of today.

But follow even unto death?

Think back to John. Does God call us in Christ to die, to hasten our mortal demise? Is that what John was up to? No! Rather **God calls us through Christ to be unafraid of death.** This is the path John walked. Jesus too walked a path that led to death, but ultimately also the defeat of death - the "declawing" of death. For this God, hidden from view but ever present in the midst of suffering and death, makes a way where none can be found - making life from death.

I'm thinking back to those other voices. To heed this call, to be unafraid of death, is to hear God's call to **Live** unafraid of death. It is this life to which we are called. This is what bears us up on the path, putting one foot in front of the other on our way to the suffering and dying - whether on our streets, at the bar, at the hospital, even in our very own homes, our own lives. To live unafraid of death looks like renouncing all the ways we try to avoid it and try not to see it. And thinking of those voices, this call becomes one that invites us to ultimately die to ourselves and all the ways we self-distract from that to which God is truly calling us.

How is this starting to sound? Is God's call to John, to Jesus, to you, starting to take root? What's missing?

The Memorial Service for Norma Alberta was Wednesday this last week. The service consisted of all kinds of stories about her. People were given a chance to share memories and Pastor Kim gave the Eulogy - basically the story of her life. One story stuck with me.

Apparently on the night Norma died, her daughter Patti and Son-in-law Jack were preparing to head out for dinner after a long day of being with her. She wasn't so much able to talk anymore so they were mostly telling stories to her and hosting other visitors who wanted to say goodbye. But as they were heading out the door, Patti said, "OK, Mom. We'll be back after dinner to say goodnight." And Norma called back: "Okay."

Norma lived a long life. She had heard the call of Jesus and followed. She knew suffering and death. But when she shouted "Okay" she seemed to be speaking (at the last) perhaps not to her daughter, but to the final call she was receiving with God - that final call home. That "Okay" seems to me the perfect word to communicate un-afraidness of death. That this was her final word speaks to her faith in a loving God who gathers up all things in God's self (in the fullness of time) according to the riches of God's grace. For the ultimate promise of God in Christ that Norma knew is that even in the face of death | God, who may not be visible, is there, walking with us and welcoming us home. Norma's trust made Norma's response "Okay."

What dawned on me after hearing all those stories of Norma was a sense of irony. Or better yet, we could call it “holy wisdom.” The promise in this call to go unafraid to suffering and death (including our own) is that as we follow Jesus down the path (ever by the Spirit) we find not only Jesus in the face of that suffering but a fullness of life (our life), even abundant life. You might call it a deeper connection to who we truly are, the person God created us to be. The life God is dying for us to know and live lies along this path. It’s in that movement toward the suffering and dying, in our dying to fears and distraction (our false selves), that we encounter God’s deepest intention for our lives.

We are very good at avoiding that path, distracting ourselves and closing our ears. As with all the disciples we meet in Mark, we stray from this path, we balk at the call, we even turn and run at times. But the call remains. Always the gracious invitation back to the path that leads where we may not want to go, but where we find both God and deepening wholeness.

Does that feel true to you? That God’s beckon down the path of Jesus leads to an un-afraidness of death? That following God’s bidding mysteriously blooms into a fullness of life we’ve never before known, that has been God’s intention for you from the beginning? That in going to the dying, attending to the suffering, we find Jesus sitting suddenly near, quietly bidding us further, closer into who God made us to be?

May it be so.

AMEN