

"Powers at Work"

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First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, July 22, 2012**

Old Testament Lesson - Psalm 48:1-8

New Testament Lesson – Mark 6:14-20, 26-29

Michael Weisser became the target of the Ku Klux Klan shortly after he and his wife moved to their new home in Lincoln, NE. It was June 1991, and the local Grand Dragon, Larry Trapp, took it upon himself to harass, intimidate and threaten Weisser, with the ultimate goal of driving him out of town. Weisser was Jewish, and a leader in the local synagogue.

When Weisser began to be bombarded by hate mail and chilling, late-night phone calls, he knew where it was coming from, and he was afraid. Yet his response spoke of hope, not hate and fear. Weisser called his tormentor back and got his answering machine. After listening to its pre-recorded anti-Semitic diatribe, he calmly offered to help Trapp, who is uses to a wheel chair, by taking him out to the grocery store.

For weeks Weisser kept at it, leaving recorded messages offering help for this Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. Finally, Klansman Trapp called him back. "What do you want? You're harassing me," complained Trapp. But soon after, Trapp called Weisser with another question; he confessed, "I want to get out of this and I don't know how." Weisser said, "I'll bring dinner and we'll talk."

A follow-up report on National Public Radio tells that Trapp eventually moved in with the Weissers and they cared for him as Trapp's health declined. In time, Trapp converted to Judaism.¹

In our New Testament Lesson today, it seems that King Herod was feeling a lot like Larry Trapp when Trapp said, "I want to get out of this and I don't know how." In his gospel account, Mark reports that Herod knew John the Baptizer "was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him." But then the king's wife, Herodias, who wanted John dead, tricked her husband into having John executed.

Mark writes, "The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately, the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head," which was brought into the banquet and set before them on a platter. Ghastly.

King Herod was a victim of his own pride, and this led to a deep sense of guilt. When Herod, misguided as he was, begins to hear more and more about the miracles of Jesus, he immediately has a mental flashback. He remembers his birthday banquet, surrounded by all his friends, and probably a few of his enemies. And in his own mind, he comes face to face with the consequence of his previous actions, saying, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

¹ Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, Dov Peretz Elkins, "Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul: 101 Stories to Open the Heart and Rekindle the Spirit," Health Communications Inc., Deerfield Beach, FL, 2001.

Herod hears about the miracles of Jesus, begins to wonder about who Jesus really is, and his guilt and pride and self centeredness get in the way of the truth.

Today's gospel lesson centers around the question: who is Jesus? So, ask yourself, who is Jesus, to you? A shepherd, our savior, friend, brother, Lord; the redeemer, our comfort, judge and moral authority; the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world – **who is Jesus**, to you? Like Herod, how we answer that question depends on the state of our soul; it depends our spiritual wellbeing – our struggle to be faithful to God amid a broken and misguided world; it depends on our relationship with God and, in that, our relationship with one another. Herod got trapped by his pride and guilt and self centeredness. There was a certain willfulness about him that would not let Herod be who he really was, who God created him to be – presumably a kind and benevolent ruler and servant leader.

What happens to us when we put self-will ahead of our spiritual needs, those things that feed our soul, when we allow pride to get in the way, when we to cling to our worldview and position in life even at the expense of doing the right thing? What happens when our pride and self centeredness actually lead us to doing wrong – hurting or dismissing those we love, giving all our time and attention to places and things and allowing the people in our lives, our relationship with God, and even our own health and vitality to suffer the consequences? What happens when our priorities and loyalties became just as misplaced and misguided as Herod's?

Well, if Herod is any example, what happens is we miss out on the promises of God and the presence of Jesus in our lives. Herod heard about Jesus, Herod knew John the Baptizer personally he even liked the guy, and still he lost touch with God and couldn't see who Jesus really is. Who Jesus is to us depends on what **powers are at work** in our lives.

Do we let our lives be run by such powers as **rumor and speculation**, the power we read about when Mark reports that some were saying Jesus is John the Baptizer raised from the dead, and others Elijah, and still others that he was a modern-day prophet modeled after their prophets of old? None of these people got it right. None of them could see Jesus for who he is, the embodiment of God. They were all trapped in their old way of thinking, their set way of seeing the world, their cut-in-stone, died-in-the-wool way of being.

Sometimes we find ourselves trapped by our worldview, don't we? And that's usually when we begin to feel things aren't working out real well for us. And yet, how often do we venture beyond what we know? How often do we lay claim to what might be – if only we were to turn over a new leaf. Or, do we even dare to hope for miracles in our lives, for a transformational moment or sudden shift in our thinking, for a new horizon to open up for us? Do we even dare to pursue new possibilities in life, to recognize that something powerful and exciting *is* calling to us? Do we recognize it when God comes to us in spirit and in flesh?

Or do we remain trapped by our own pride and fear – trapped because we are afraid to do what it takes to be truly set free, to become who God would have us be.

Herod was trapped by pride. And Herod's pride put him at the mercy of his guilt. Do we ever let the power of **pride and guilt** rule our lives? Do we ever let pride or guilt keep us from saying we're sorry for something we've done that's wrong?

Or, sometimes we flip it around, don't we? We use pride and guilt against someone else, just like Herod's wife did, when she used his pride to manipulated Herod to get what she wanted, the head of John the Baptizer.

Manipulating people; it's an ugly business, and yet we do it. We don't always get away with it, but we do it. And usually it comes back to bite us? Like the mother in Florida who got a call from her son asking, "How are you doing?" And She said, "Not so good. I've been very weak." "Why are you so weak?" asked the son. "Because I haven't eaten in 38 days," said his mother. "How come you haven't eaten in 38 days?" he asked. To which his mother replied, "I didn't want my mouth to be filled with food in case you called." That's kind of funny. But using guilt or pride or anything else to manipulate others is not. And what's worse is we actually allow people to do it to us don't we? To manipulate us because we're hanging on to our own sense of pride, or we're hiding our guilt when we've done something wrong. We let our "needs" and our comfort dictate how we respond to the world around us. But really, how faithful is that, how faithful are we being to who God created us to be? How much confidence in God do we really display in life? Do our lives in any way reflect the assurance that God is ready to bless us beyond our wildest imaginations – and certainly beyond where our pride or guilt or self centeredness would take us?

John did not let pride get in his way. John did not let rumors or speculation have power over his life. John continued to share the good news of Jesus Christ no matter what anyone said. He showed in his words and actions an unflinching faith in who God is and who we can become as God's people. The power at work in John's life was the power of his **conviction and faith** about who Jesus really is. John knew that not even death itself could defeat what God was up to in the world.

And so it is today. There is nothing in the world, nothing in your past, nothing between you and anyone else on earth that can get in the way of God's plan for you and for the world. The only question for us is what powers are at work in our lives? Are our lives ruled by the power of rumor and speculation, pride and guilt? Does our sense of self – our self centeredness – get in the way of who God would have us be? Or, are we – are you; am I – able to stand firm in our convictions and rely on our faith to dictate who we are and how we act as followers of Christ? It's not an easy question to answer. Oh, it's easy to say in our heart of hearts that we trust in the Lord and have faith in God. But when it comes to how we live our lives – to the choices we make and the responses we give in life – it's not easy to live by our convictions. So we have to ask ourselves, in rising to the challenge, who are we going to be, who do we say Christ is? Are we going to be like Herod, happy to hear about Jesus and yet unwilling to trust in our faith and to put our beliefs into action? Are we going to let our lives be run by such negative forces as the power of rumor and speculation, pride and guilt, and self-centered thoughts and actions.

Or are we going to model our lives after faithful souls like John the Baptizer, to live our lives in the certainty of what's possible with God, to choose to speak the words and take the actions that reflect the convictions of our faith?

Because in the end, that is how we are called to live. As Christians, we are called to turn our backs on the negative forces in our lives and, instead, choose with all our words and actions to live into the power of God's promise; the power of the divine promise of new possibilities and richer blessings, a promise made possible for us in the certainty of Christ's strength and the assurance of Christ's presence in our lives and in the world? **Amen.**

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, in this holy time and place of prayer, we ask you to come into the safe and protected corners of our hearts and minds. Grant us the courage to give to you what you find there ... the things that are too heavy for us to carry ..., our resentments ..., our anxiety ..., our anger ..., our doubt ..., our confusion. Where you find hearts filled with the pain and grief of loss, with sighs too deep for words, give us the peace which passes all understanding. When our doubt speaks louder than our faith, remind us that you came to us in your Son Jesus, who also suffered ..., and wept ..., and endured ..., and triumphed – even over death. Help us to pray with confidence because your Son gave us his promise, saying, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of time.” Help us, God, to move beyond where we are to what we might become. Help us to take our sorrows and the guilt of bitter betrayals and let them go, bit by bit, so that we do not become sorrowful or creatures of revenge. Help us to weave the losses of our lives into something beautiful, made possible only because of your redemptive power. Let the horrors of our lives lose their sway over us as we let them go; and in their place, let us grow love.

This we ask in the name of the One who came to us that we might know love, the One who is love personified, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to say when we pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom
come, thy will be done, on earth as it
is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive
our debtors; and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom
and the power and the glory forever. Amen.