
Welcome, Welcome, Welcome

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
at All Saints by-the-Sea Episcopal Church, Southport, Maine
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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart find favor in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Please be seated.

Why is Mark telling us this story? This is the question that we explored in our Bible study on Tuesday morning. And we came up with a number of answers. First, it's historically true. He was simply restating the historical record, and I think that's right. Second, it was prefiguring the fate of Jesus. You will remember that Jesus is going to have his own problems with religious and political authorities. And I think that's true, too. But it seems like there's more. You see this story fits right in the middle of Jesus commissioning his disciples, and they're returning from their first journey. And the themes of that story are relatively clear. It's about the kingdom of heaven.

When Jesus commissions the disciples, he sends them out in pairs. He tells them to go into a town, and if you're rejected, simply leave the town. Shake the dust off of your feet as if to say it's not your responsibility that you were rejected. Let it go. "Others will accept you," he says, "And this is how we will build the kingdom."

You could see the elements that are required for the building of the kingdom, the body of Christ, the vulnerability, the need for hospitality, the interdependence among the disciples and the people to whom they were administering. All of those values that creates space for God to be present.

And then when they return, it's the feeding of the 5,000. Another time of need when Jesus, through his blessing and presence, is able to feed everyone who is there, as if to say you already have everything that you need if you are part of one community that exhibits these values: vulnerability, hospitality, interdependence.

So right in the middle of this wonderful sermon, there is an interruption. And that interruption is this story about John and his death. It's unusual in its form, longer than Mark normally takes, full of detail that don't seem to be present in many of Mark's other stories. And it's not even in the chronological sequence. It's a memory of something that already happened. So why is it there?

I think the key to the answer comes in the eighth chapter of John, when Jesus, trying to talk to his disciples about what they just witnessed in the feeding of the 5,000, says, "Beware. Watch out for the yeast of Herod and the yeast of the Pharisees. Or in some translations, the leaven of Herod and the leaven of the Pharisees. As if to say, this story of John and our controversies with the Pharisees show us the powers that we must overcome to bring the kingdom.

We have the values of the kingdom there in the story already told. It's this story about John and Herod, which reveals the powers that have to be overcome. So for example, Herod. It's kind of interesting he had to throw his own birthday party, it's it? That's what happens. So number one, Herod has married a woman who's the daughter of a King nearby in order to solidify his political stability. And then he divorces her in order to marry his brother's wife, because that helps him with his claim to his father's throne.

Now this is against Jewish law because his brother is still alive, but it is not against Roman law. So John is saying, you are not legitimate ruler to the Jews, because you don't conform to Jewish law. It's a political threat that Herod is feeling. And then once Herod makes this rash promise, then he actually does something he doesn't want to do, because he's concerned about how he'll look to the others that are gathered there.

So we can see Herod's yearning for power and control, and his yearning for approval and affection of others driving his behavior. I would call them the powers that have to be overcome. And then there's a third set of powers, too. In the Pharisee controversies, they are the ones that are saying, "You are violating the law that we've established for God's people." They are so worried about their own security and safety that they can't see the good that Jesus is trying to do by creating space for God in the lives of God's people.

So these three things, power and control, approval and affection, security and safety, I think tend to drive us to make so much of ourselves that there's not enough room for God. And if there's not enough room for God, there's not enough room for God's kingdom. I think the story is here, not because it's gruesome or not just because it's historical, and not just because it prefigures Jesus, but because it reveals a truth, not about Herod, but about us. It reveals the truth about us, the powers that we have to overcome in order to create space for God in our lives.

Now, there is actually something you can do about this. It's not just an abstract concept. You can learn to experience those yearnings and do something about it. Here's the key. Generally when one of those powers is trying to assert itself, so trying to assert ourselves, we will feel when it's threatened some negative emotion, shame, or anger, or fear, or frustration. That's often the first sign what's really happening is one of our projects for happiness, one of our projects involving these powers that inflate ourselves is being challenged. And when we react to it rather than respond to it, then we're captive and not free.

If you go back to that story of Herod, can you feel how reactive he is? He hasn't stopped to think about anything. He doesn't even know why he's doing what he's doing. All he knows is he's been threatened. His power and control has been threatened. His approval and affection has been threatened. And it's the same with the Pharisees, whose safety and security is threatened, and they are reactive.

But there's a practice that we can engage in. It will help us respond and not react. It's called the welcome prayer. And it's very simple. It's just three steps, but I'm going to describe it to you, then I'm going to encourage you to try it out this week, use it in your own lives.

The first step is simply to focus. Notice when that negative emotion begins to resonate in your body, the frustration, or the fear, or the anger. Don't try to explain it. Don't try to understand it. Don't start telling stories about it. Just notice that it's there. That's enough.

Second step. Welcome it. This is the most counterintuitive part, I think. You really want it to go away. You really want to change the situation, but instead, welcome it. Notice it, name it, welcome it. Welcome pain. Welcome fear. Welcome frustration. There's something about owning it that robs it of its power over you. There's something about welcoming it, not the situation that caused it necessarily, but that negative emotion itself, which lets you hold onto some space for God and keep you from becoming so large there's no space there for God to inhabit.

And then third, let it go. Just as Jesus counseled the disciples to shake the dust off of their feet when rejected, so we let that emotion go. Which is the same as saying, we're going to be fully present in this moment without qualification, without demands that it change, that it go away. Let it go. These three things, focus, welcome, let it go, will help us deal with the assertion in our lives of these powers that captivated Herod, and captivated the Pharisees, and made so little room for God.

Now, I know it's hard to take this in as a description. I was actually teaching this once when I went through what I thought was a very elaborate and wonderful description, but it just didn't resonate. And when I got home and told my wife, Mary Hunter, about this, she said, "Why don't you tell them a story about when you use this prayer?" And I said, "Well, actually I just used it this morning. You and Robert left early for church and I was racing around trying to get ready. And I thought I was going to be late, and you know how you feel when it's like I'm late and that's going to happen, and I already was envisioning my death because I might be late to church.

When I opened the refrigerator to put something back in it, out came this plastic tin of cherry tomatoes. You know what happens, right? ... It hits the floor and they went everywhere. I'm thinking I should just leave them there, but I didn't want to do that. So as I thought, well, I'll pick them up. And as I stooped down, I looked in the refrigerator and it is packed with food. Automatically, I could feel it happening. Why do we have all this food? We are never going to eat all this food. We could have guests over for dinner for the next six weeks and we wouldn't consume all this food. I am going to have to throw away half this food because she won't get around to doing it.

I worked myself into a complete fit right there. So I tried the welcome prayer. And Mary Hunter said, "That

would have been great. They'd love that. Why didn't you do that?" I said, "Because it didn't work. I'm still mad at you now."

It takes time to practice this prayer. But I'll tell you another story where it worked a little bit better. You see, in our house, I have a little corner. It was a screened porch at one point, now it's glassed in. And it's where I go. It's my space. My icons are there. My books are there. It's mine. And everybody knows to leave me alone when I'm in that space. And it's often where I go in morning to get some quiet time to say my prayers. So I'm in that space one morning and everything is going swimmingly. God is clearly present. And I hear the sound of Percy Jackson. Now, you may not know who Percy Jackson is. But Percy Jackson is a fictional character who's in these wonderful fictional stories about the Greek gods. Rick Riordan is the writer. And Robert, our then eight-year-old son, my stepson, loves Percy Jackson. Loves Percy Jackson. What he doesn't like so much are headphones.

So here I am in this space. Here's Percy Jackson. I can't see him, but I can hear him. He's coming down the stairs. He is going into the bathroom. He's slamming the door just a little bit too loud. Then he's going into the kitchen looking for something else. And I'm completely disrupted, and I am not happy. And as I get more and more frustrated, suddenly I think, he's doing this to me on purpose. I think he's doing this intentionally, in fact, he turned up the volume.

And so I did the welcome prayer. And this time it was different. This time when I got to the letting go part, there was literally a warming feeling. And I had this sense that Robert loves Percy Jackson. Watching him listen to Percy Jackson is like watching pure joy embodied. And I get to be the guy who helps create a space where this joy is present. This is a complete gift and I get to be part of it. And I went in an instant from frustrated, and angry, and the feelings of persecution, to gratitude for just being present there. Because, clearly, God was present there.

So it's not easy. Sometimes the cherry tomatoes are just too much. But sometimes welcome prayer lets you step out of that space a little bit and give space for God to enter into it, where you can respond to the event that is occurring in front of you, and not react to it.

So why has Mark told us this story about Herod and John? I think it's to tell us some truth about ourselves, to show us how powerful those yearnings in us are for power and control, for affection and approval, for safety and security. And to give us a sense of what it takes to break free of them and create space for God in our lives. So I recommend the welcome prayer to you. Try it. Focus. Welcome. Let go. You may find that you have God there beside you as you respond to what has just happened, and avoid reacting to it. It's a good way to be. Amen.