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St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
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Pentecost VI
Mark 6:14-29

A history lesson.

A long time ago there was a ruler called Herod the Great. Herod the Great was appointed King of the Jews by the Roman Emperor, and he had five wives. One of them, in fact, was Cleopatra.

Herod the Great's second wife was Mariamne Number 1 (his fourth wife was Mariamne Number 2). She had at least two sons, who were both killed – but not before one of them fathered a daughter, Herodias, and two sons, Agrippa Number 1 and Herod, a different Herod from the one we usually talk about.

Herodias seems to have been a political maven. She married another Herod, Beothus, then she divorced him and married his brother, Antipas, who became known as Herod Antipas. Now Antipas was also her uncle. His father was Herod the Great. Well, back to Herodias – yes, she first married Herod Beothus (who was also her uncle, son of Herod's wife Mariamne Number 2). They were parents of Salome (who actually doesn't have a name in the Gospel of Mark, but there you are...). When Herodias came to Herod Antipas' court, Salome came along for the ride.

Now according to Hebrew law, the only time a man could marry his brother's wife was if his brother died. That's called a levirate marriage, and there are several examples of levirate marriage in the Bible – Boas, for example, married Ruth after her husband died. Tamar, through trickery, causes the father of her dead husband to father a child with her because he refused to allow his third son, the dead man's brother, to marry her – thus showing the significance of the law.

John the Baptist certainly knew Hebrew law. Remember how he preaches “repent! the kingdom of heaven is near!”? And so John the Baptist has some rather judgmental remarks to pass on about Herodias and her dear husband Number 2, Herod Antipas.

Herodias is a bit sensitive about this. Furious, actually. She wants him dead.

Herod, curious about John the Baptist, has heard of him many times – he's a prophet in Herod's land, and that could be cause for political alarm.

Herodias convinces Herod to have John arrested. And at this point in the story, he's in prison.

Herod is giving a party. Herodias is there as hostess. Salome is there as... well, it appears Salome is there for entertainment of a sort.

Her entertainment is so, well, entertaining, that Herod is captivated. Herod said, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it."

Salome is something of a mama's girl. She asks Herodias, "Whatever shall I ask for?" Herodias whispers in her ear: "The head of that baptizer on a platter."

And so Salome asks the king for the head of John the Baptist. On a platter.

What can Herod do? He made a solemn oath to Salome in front of his guests. So the king sent a soldier to behead John, and the soldier returned to the banquet with John's head on a platter; he gave it to Salome. Salome gave it to Herodias. It's not clear whether or not Herod actually saw the result of his oath.

Time passes.

Jesus is out and about driving out demons, anointing and curing the sick. Herod has heard of this man. Some say, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead." Others said, "It is Elijah," the Old Testament prophet who, it was promised, would return before the end of times. Some said, "It is a prophet." But Herod said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

"John, whom I beheaded."

Was Herod feeling a tad bit guilty?

"...the times have been,
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end, but now they rise again..." (*Macbeth*)

No, that's not from the Bible, but from Shakespeare. *Macbeth*, in fact. Macbeth has had his political foe, Banquo, murdered, and Banquo's ghost has appeared. And Macbeth might be feeling a bit like Herod. Guilty. Fearful.

Ever felt guilty?

Ever felt like some wrong you've done might come back to haunt you? Something like John rising from the dead, or Banquo appearing at a banquet?

Perhaps you've told a lie. Or a really big fib. And you've been caught: the truth has come out. Uh-oh.

Perhaps you've snubbed someone. And you now find out that they will be called as a reference for that job you really really want.

Uh-oh.

Embarrassing, huh.

When something like this happens, and the reality of life has come back to haunt you, you must remember this:

You
Are
Forgiven.

We are called to make amends, to apologize, to ask for forgiveness, to attempt reconciliation. That is how we remain in relationship with one another.

But beyond all that, we believe in a God who forgives us over and over and over again.

I don't think Herod or Macbeth had that God.

Granted, Herod and Macbeth have committed horrible crimes. They have murdered. Murdered for personal gain. And never asked for forgiveness – from the mourning disciples of John the Baptist or from the family of Banquo. Never asked forgiveness, never prayed, never confessed to anyone the exact nature of their sins.

And yet even a murderer is forgiven by God.

For God knows our deepest darkest places and yet continues to hold us in an embrace of love. I'm not saying that God doesn't care if we lie or speak ill of our neighbor or commit murder. No. God does care. God weeps.

Yet in the unfathomable economy of God's love, God forgives even the liar, the hypocrite, and the murderer.

God forgives you.

God forgives me.

I don't know how it happens, but I have faith that it does.

I have faith that God knows my deepest secrets and forgives me.

I have faith that God knows the sins of the world and forgives us.

I have faith that God's love is so generous that it has no restriction, no boundary, no limit.

Jesus Christ died as an act of forgiveness, an act of drawing us all into God's embrace, an act which turned the world upside down and brought us into new relationship with the God who is Love.

And we are blessed by that grace. We don't deserve it, we didn't ask for it, but we are blessed by that grace.

And when we draw together in communion with one another, we remember that we are in communion with God. Our celebration of Eucharist is a thanksgiving for God's love and God's mercy.

And all God asks from us is thanksgiving. And love.

Amen.