

**Ephesians 1:3-14** *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.*

**Mark 6:14-29** *King Herod heard of Jesus and his disciples, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."*

*For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." 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. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.*

This week's readings present a stark contrast. Paul's beautiful letter, addressed to the Ephesians, affirms the strength and goodness of our life in God – the lavishness of God's love and grace – God's promise to us. And then we read Mark's account of a reality of the world: for human ugliness reigns supreme in the beheading of John the Baptizer.

One world – Two completely different perspectives. One of hope and healing. The other: pain and hideous death.

Let's take these readings one at a time – In reverse chronological order – for while Mark tells of terror that was and is, Paul stands in the perspective of the rest of the story in Jesus the Christ.

We talk a lot about reading the Bible in context. Knowing, especially for Paul's letters, that they were most often written to a specific group of people to address a specific situation – read that 'problem' – among them. So we study to learn exactly what was going on – and look at what Paul said to that particular group – and work to know what that tells us for our lives.

The Letter to the Ephesians is different. It's called a circular letter – that is, one intended for all of the churches of the day, with information about life and the Kingdom of God – about Jesus – hopes – ways – expectations – exhortations – to all of the followers. It's a beautiful letter – for them – and for us today. It distills the hope and love of God in Jesus Christ to its very essence. Six short chapters for us to savor and hold dear.

Paul assures us that God blesses us – That we are, in fact, adopted as God's own children: a bond that in the legal system at least, is stronger than birth – for adopted children can never be disinherited. We are God's

own – Forever. Forgiven – given all that God is as our inheritance – promised us through Jesus – to be redeemed, in the fullness of time.

And in the meantime – there’s the story of John’s beheading.

We know John the Dipper – not to be confused with the newish denomination that identifies by baptism – John was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth in their old age. A miracle from his beginning! John was the baby who leapt in Elizabeth’s womb when young Mary went to tell her cousin the good news that was to be Jesus.

Raised by Elizabeth – and Zechariah, a high priest – John’s young life was likely among the spartan and faithful Essene community. Holding fast to the word and ways of God – outside of the Temple’s bustle and business for the most part.

John’s the one whom we find in the desert – the wildish man – in skins – eating locust and wild honey – shouting to all that would hear that Jesus – the Great One – was come. Prepare the way!

And it was John who baptized his own cousin into the rest of this life’s work – immersing Jesus in the Jordan – to hear the voice of God as Jesus rose from the water. THIS is my Son!

Jesus went on – And John went on – both speaking the truth of the Kingdom of God – so far from so many of the ways of the people who’d rather BE God. Calling – crying – for repentance! Teaching that life comes only when we turn from the things of our making that are NOT God – and turn to the peace that is love in God.

And let’s just say – that totally ticked a bunch of people off. For while some welcomed the truth – others would kill it – rather than give up whatever they could get their hands on – and kill the messenger along with it. Such was John’s fate.

Frankly, it seems Herod had pretty good respect for John – The text says he “feared him” and so he “protected him.” The historian Josephus tells us that Herod brought John in periodically – to speak – to teach – to converse. Herod knew him as a Holy man. Yet the Jordan, site of much of John’s work – was the western border of Herod’s territory – and John spoke out against Herod’s marriage to his own brother’s divorcee. That just set Herod’s bride – Herodias – on fire. She was rippin’ – and she wanted John just plain dead. There are a whole lot of people still who would kill the ones who call them out on bad form.

So Herod had put John in prison. Not good enough for Herodias. And on the occasion of Herod’s birthday party, with a good deal of liquid celebration, her young daughter inadvertently provided her means of revenge. Following the girl’s dance, Herod offered her a wish. After consulting with her mother, the girl returned – with a grievous demand of Herod – yet one which, to refuse – would make him look weak – spineless – and shameful – in front of the guests. The child asked for what no child would or should ever ask: the head of another – on a banquet platter. The delivery of Evil. Quite a mother’s legacy.

And so it was done – Herod, tossing away any sense of integrity, chose crowd-pleasing - popularity – public opinion over the Right. And in that choice he showed himself spineless and impotent in kingly judgement. John’s head was severed and served in an act that matches the most vicious and evil in our time – Evil triumphed. Worse still, through the manipulation of a child.

How easily we can corrupt the good for our perceived gain. How easy to whip away from God. Vengeance is indeed a cold and sickening dish. And destruction because of truth-speaking – whether we like to hear it or not – is that much worse. Too often, we kill the messenger.

The pain inflicted by life against God wasn't new in John's time. It remains all too commonplace. Atrocities of too many dimensions continue. The pain of the world remains. Sometimes it's as grotesque as beheading.

Yet all too often it's that seemingly more innocuous cutting off of anger – disdain – slander – bullying – gossip – Behaviors we see as ordinary – even acceptable – until we view the damage each can do. Until we see the swath of separation and pain cut by those invisible swords.

It's pain inflicted by another. It's still destruction.

We can be vigilant – and in our lives we can stop our part in that beheading. Every time we are tempted.

And we won't stop all of the evil – or the disease and disaster - in this world. We will still struggle in our faith sometimes. Know that is normal – It's normal to struggle. We can and should. And in struggling, we turn to God for answers beyond our understanding. For comfort beyond what we can know.

Even John struggled. In his pain, sent a message to Jesus before his death - to ask, "*Are you the One?*"

For while John the Prophet - the cousin - the forerunner – knew that Jesus was and is the One, in his weakness, even he cried out for reassurance. And through the messengers, Jesus reminded John of the healing begun already on earth. We are no different – we struggle too, in spite of faith.

Yet there is one huge difference between our struggles and John: John didn't live to see the rest of the story. John was killed before Jesus' resurrection. And it's the resurrection that speaks the rest of the story. The rest of the story is life – in peace – in joy – in God. That our Being cannot be destroyed. That no pain or evil can separate us from Love. That we will never be alone.

Lancelot Andrewes, my 16<sup>th</sup> century favorite says it this way: "*We can roll the stone against the door of the tomb, and shut the doors against the world, but Christ keeps coming to burst out of the tomb and to make his entrance into our fearful lives.*"

Jesus has faced down the evil. Died and lived through the pain. And we, "*marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit*" by following him, are already part of the promise of the letter to the Ephesians – We live as children of God, on Earth, as it is in Heaven.

Living in Jesus, we stop the beheading at our hands. Just Stop. In Jesus, we dare to listen – dare to wonder – We seek to live more as God's own in each day. Shaking off the dust and moving on if we are rejected. Putting down the sword and walking away when we are challenged. Protecting the innocent? Yes. Provoking the confusing? Feeding the fire of evil? NO.

For God so loved the world – the WORLD – that God gave Jesus – that the WORLD might be saved – one by one by one – living in his example. That means dying to the power of us – Rather than living in support of evil.

It's me and you. It's one by one. It's us together. We'll go for it again this week. And next. The Kingdom of God is Here. So welcome Jesus in peace each day, as he bursts into your life! **Amen.**