

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 11, 2021

AMOS 7:7-15 | PSALM 85:8-13 | EPHESIANS 1:3-14 | MARK 6:14-29

St. Mark's gospel has a lot in common with the movie *Jaws*. They are both set in fishing villages. They are both about people who would benefit a bigger boat. And they are both about the unseen dangers lurking below the surface, out of sight and out of mind.

Up to this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus's ministry has been seemingly unstoppable. Everywhere Jesus goes, there are people who want to see him and be near him, be healed by him and learn from him. Even when Jesus is rejected in his hometown, the rejection seems more ignorant than malicious. The Jesus movement seems to be growing rapidly, spreading over the countryside like one of those famous mustard seeds. If there is a problem, it's that there are too many people who want to follow Jesus.

Until John the Baptist is killed. That story feels somewhat random dropped in here, but it tells us two important things about Jesus's ministry that will become more important as we go through Mark's gospel.

The first is that there are people who are threatened by the kingdom of God. They are not merely disciples who misunderstand parts of Jesus's message or bystanders who are skeptical of Jesus, but people who recognize who Jesus is, what his ministry means, and what the kingdom of God entails and consciously reject it. They are not simply struggling with this whole parable thing. They are anxious about being dislodged from their current position of power and privilege.

In the other gospels, this resistance gets loaded right up front. In Matthew, King Herod kills the Holy Innocents and the holy family flees into Egypt. In Luke, Simeon blesses the family and then ominously tells Mary that a sword will pierce her soul, too. In John, we're told right up front that people rejected Jesus. Only in Mark do you get this sort of slow build that underneath all the crowds and adulation something isn't quite right.

That brings us to the second point, which is a little more complicated but more important. So far in Mark's gospel, we've been hearing about bigger crowds and more enthusiastic followers. But the death of John the Baptist serves as a kind of inflection point. And now people are going to start peeling away. The crowds are going to get smaller until they disappear entirely. When Jesus dies at the end of Mark's gospel, he doesn't offer some stoic phrase about how his work is finished or offer a prayer commending his spirit into God's hands. He asks God, "Why have you abandoned me?"

The paradox of that moment is that it is at that moment of abandonment, Jesus is enacting God's presence. Instead of looking for God somewhere else, we're told that God is acting here in the body of Christ. It is now up to Jesus to embody the action of God in the world. That sense of abandonment brings grief and sadness, but it also brings a new level of responsibility.

That's the subtext of today's gospel reading. After all, John was likely a kind of mentor for Jesus. After John's death, Jesus can no longer look to John for guidance and instruction. Jesus can no longer decide that proclaiming the kingdom of God is too difficult but John has the same basic ideas and you should go follow him. Once John the Baptist is killed, Jesus not only becomes aware of evil in a new way, but he also takes on responsibility in a new way. There's no one else you can place responsibility on. You are responsible for enacting the kingdom of God.

And this is why this seemingly random story is important for us to hear even if it isn't particularly pleasant. Because we know something of that feeling of realizing that we're "on our own." And the dread comes not so much from loneliness as from the weight of responsibility. There comes a time when we realize that being faithful means taking on responsibility.

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Last summer, I was on a call with a bunch of people from around the synod, and one of our Black pastors said that the week after George Floyd was murdered, she started getting lots of phone calls from congregations all over the state. People she had never talked to before. People who had never shown any interest in the work she'd been doing for years on racism. But all these people suddenly started calling up and they all had the same question. "What are we going to do now?"

It's the right question. But it was being asked for the wrong reason. Those people thought they were asking for a program, a resource, an action, something they could do. But what they really wanted was for someone else to take on the responsibility. To say, *You decide what a faithful response is for us*. What they wanted was to stop asking, "What should we do now?"

But there is no way to be faithful to our calling without asking that question again and again and again. If we ever stop asking that question, it's not because we've reached the fullness of wisdom. It's because we've given up our responsibility.

To use the language from today's reading from Ephesians, there is an ever-present temptation to try to be "blameless." To have done nothing wrong. To have made no mistakes. To get to the end of life and say that we did it perfectly. And too often, the way that we pursue that blamelessness is by staying out of it. Don't get involved. Don't get specific. Don't upset anyone.

But the blamelessness the author of Ephesians talks about comes less from our actions than our identity. We are blameless not when we act perfectly but when we are "in Christ." The thing that gives us the ability to take on responsibility isn't our belief in the quality of our judgements. It's our trust that we are a community that is promised forgiveness and reconciliation when we trust that we are in Christ.

What does that all mean for us? It means that following Jesus will mean getting involved with the world, taking on responsibility, and encountering situations where we have to decide what it means to be faithful. Not just copying whatever our neighbors are doing. Not just by waiting for churchwide to make a rule we have to abide by. Not just by calling the Black pastor and asking her to fix racism for us. We have to decide what it means to be the people of God in this moment.

And whenever we encounter those situations, we should make our reverent best guess and get on with it.¹ Reverent because we're trying to further God's redeeming and reconciling work in the world. Best because that we're making informed and educated decisions. Guess because we're opening ourselves up to judgement. And getting on with it because inaction is a choice, too.

This might be a grotesque reading for a nice Sunday morning, but I would wager that it's a surprisingly useful one. Because at some point, you realize that you have to figure out what it means to be faithful. And that's when it gets hard. That's when the real work begins. That's when our calling and life together becomes most necessary. No, it begins when John the Baptist is dead. When the crowds are gone. When there is no rule from on high to follow.

What should we do now? Remember that you are in Christ. And make your reverent best guess.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

¹ David J. Lose, *Making Sense of Martin Luther: Participant Book* (Fortress Press, 2017), 126.