

Sermon July 14, 2024
[Amos 7:7-15; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29]

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I'm happy! I'm happy to see each of you again. I'm also happy that it's not 114 degrees outside. It's good to be back.

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

As most of you know, I was gone for two weeks, and so I thought the title of today's message might go something like "The Return of the Rabbi."

Question is, why do I refer to myself as a "rabbi," which, as you know in Hebrew and Aramaic means "teacher." I mean, I was already a teacher before I came to Queen Anne Lutheran Church. But I am no longer simply a teacher, nor am I simply a pastor. I am a pastor *and* teacher, or as a few of you like to say, I am a pastoral theologian. Now, some of you might wonder about that: either you're a pastor or you're a teacher. You can't be both.

The Bible says otherwise. Listen to Ephesians 4.

"But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, [meaning those sent out], some prophets, [meaning those who declare the word of the Lord], some evangelists, [meaning those who attempt to convert and proselytize], some pastors and teachers who equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of a full stature of Christ."

Did you hear what this author said? "Pastors and teachers" – there is no comma in the original Greek. There is no punctuation in the original Greek, but there is the word *kai*, which means "and." That suggests that for this author, at least, to be a pastor, or, as some translations render it, to be a "shepherd," is at the same time to be a "teacher."

The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has long recognized this insofar as they ordain certain people to the ministry of education, others to the ministry of the church. I suppose you could say, in my case, it's a both, and I invite you, therefore, to hold these together, pastor *and* teacher, whenever you think of my call as your pastor. Both/and, in other words, Rabbi.

So now that I'm back, now that my identity has been firmly reestablished, let's get rabbinical! Today's readings raise a lot of questions. I'm going to identify five, as they appear in Ephesians and Mark, our second reading and Gospel reading respectively.

From the second reading, Ephesians: Does free will exist? How so, if God "chose us in Christ from the foundation of the world?"

From the second reading, again, Ephesians: What does it *mean* to say “we have been *redeemed* through Christ’s blood?”

Again, the second reading: Is the Bible the Word of God? If so, according to Ephesians 1:13, what is the “word of truth,” and why does this author equate it with the Gospel, rather than the Bible?

And then, from our Gospel reading: When people equate Jesus with the recently deceased John the Baptist or Elijah, does that mean they believe in reincarnation? Is reincarnation in the Bible?

Or again from our Gospel reading: Was Herod really such a bad guy?

Finally, I have a question that I would like to add to all of these readings, all of these questions, which I will share at the end of today’s message.

Aren’t you glad I’m back? We have a lot of questions here, and it creates a problem, as some of you know – maybe just a few of you know – I have occasionally gone, how do we say it: “over time” when preaching in the past. I’m quite aware of that venial sin, and so we’re going to ensure that that doesn’t happen today. How are we going to do that? We’re going to have you choose *three* questions of the five I mentioned, each of which I will answer in three minutes or less.

We’ll need a timer. Dylan, would you be our timer today? You have a certain air of authority. All right. So Dylan, when I say “go,” you’ll call me at three minutes. Okay? Say “time.” All right? Again, so Dylan will help us call time after three minutes.

So let’s review the questions, and then we’re going to vote on the three we want to hear about the most.

First question: Does free will exist? (Three minutes, I don’t know why I set myself up for these things...)

Second question: How are we redeemed through Christ’s blood?

Third question: Is the Bible the word of God? If so, what is the “word of truth” according to Ephesians? Why does Ephesians equate the word of truth with the Gospel rather than the Bible?

Fourth question: When people equate Jesus with John the Baptist or Elijah, does that mean they believe in reincarnation? Is reincarnation Biblical?

And then finally: Was Herod really such a bad guy?

So free will; blood of Christ; Is the Bible the word of God; Is reincarnation Biblical; and Herod’s character.

Let's take a vote. Free will. How many would like to hear? Oh, wow. Okay, so gosh, okay. I was hoping you wouldn't choose that one!

Okay, Blood of Christ. A few of you... (I had a really good answer for that one.)

Is the Bible, the Word of God? Oh, that's juicy. Alright.

Does the Bible teach reincarnation?

Was Herod really a bad guy?

Oh, okay, so we're going to go with free will; reincarnation; Herod's character; and, if I have any time left over, I'll say a few words about the Bible being the Word of God. All right.

So, our first task is to explain the problem of free will. According to Ephesians 1 (I get three minutes, again, for each of these, so, Timer: on my mark, ready, go:

Ephesians says, "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 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."

What is this text saying? It's saying that from the beginning, we have been loved by God. We have been claimed by God. When Lutherans baptize infants, that's our way of saying God initiates the relationship. We are loved, and in response to that love, we are invited to love others out of gratitude and joy. So here "claims" has another fancy, technical word. The author of Ephesians uses it, at one point, in a truncated form: "predestination." So here's the thing: Lutherans historically affirm the doctrine of predestination, namely, that God has claimed us from the beginning.

This is *not* the same thing, Martin Luther argued, as *determinism*. Determinism simply means that everything that has happened, has happened according to God's will in the world. *Predestination*, on the other hand, refers to the ultimate destiny of our innermost being, of our souls. See that? So one concerns the finality of salvation, as something given by God; the other, determinism, simply talks about everything coming to pass, as John Calvin once put it, everything foreordained by God.

Luther makes this great distinction. He says, with respect to God, we are not free. We are not capable — you know this from our liturgy — of loving God with our whole hearts; we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves. We are bound, in other words, to our ego, to our self-centeredness. *However*, with respect to others, and matters of everyday things, we are free. God didn't foreordain me picking this binder up from the pulpit here! So, when it comes to freedom below, whether that's the kind of toothpaste

you use, (*Time! All right, 10 seconds. Now I feel like I'm in a presidential debate. 10 seconds...*)

Freedom above, Freedom below...

When it comes to "general Providence," God claims us. When it comes to "special Providence," i.e. everything happening for a reason, *that* belongs to the category of free will. It's a both/and.

Next, Reincarnation: (*ready Timer, go!*)

⁴King Herod heard of it, 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." ¹⁵But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

Notice what's being said here. Some were saying Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead. How else could he perform these miracles, these "deeds of power" as Mark calls them? That's from the Greek word *dyname*, which is where we get the word dynamite in English. So, how else could Jesus perform these deeds and powers, these miracles, if not being the resurrected form of John the Baptist? He's a supernatural being, a ghost. How else could Jesus do what he was doing?

Others were saying he's Elijah, based on the prophecy in Malachi 3, that Elijah would come before the Messiah. You see what they missed here? The truth is Elijah had come, in the person of John the Baptist, not literally Elijah. We don't believe in reincarnation, but John came in the spirit of Elijah, who announced the way of the Messiah, who was Jesus.

John the Baptist, moreover, resembles the prophets of old in the way that he dresses, in the kind of foods he consumes, and in the very texts he quotes, primarily from the third part of Isaiah, where John the Baptist talks about making straight a path in the wilderness.

So, does the Bible teach reincarnation? Not really. The thinking here on the part of the crowd, is that John was simply raised as in the spirit of Jesus, or Jesus raised in the spirit of John. Rather, the reference to Elijah is to Malachi 3. And then the comparison with the prophets of old is because John the Baptist resembled them.

So now we've heard two answers.

We are not free, with respect to God, with respect to fate, vocation and others, we are this answer.

The Bible, strictly speaking, does not teach reincarnation. You might say there are hints and allegations of it in popular belief, but none of those is officially biblical teaching. *(Time? Perfect. All right. Do you see that this is a professional at work right here?)*

All right, let's turn to Herod's character. "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."

And then, in verse 26: "The king was deeply grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her."

Now this passage is really a confusing story, and I hate saying the Gospel of our of the Lord after someone has been beheaded, that is clearly not good news.

The text, moreover, as I just said, is hard to follow. Herodias is identified not only as the divorced wife of Philip Herod's brother, whom Herod marries, the relationship of which is criticized by John the Baptist, based upon Levitical law in the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible), but the text and some commentators suggest Mark was mistaken. He also identifies the Herod's stepdaughter as Herodias; tradition says more likely her name was Salome.

So, you have three primary characters here in addition to John: Herod, whose father was Herod the Great. When we hear about Jesus's birth, we hear about it during the reign of Herod the Great. So we have Herod Antipas, which is this character; his wife, Herodias, who was formerly married to his brother, and his stepdaughter, Salome. Salome is the one who, at her mother's urging, gets John the Baptist beheaded by Herod.

When you hear a passage like verses 20 and 26 however, it doesn't make it sound like Herod was a one-dimensional character. He's not. It would seem the Darth Vader of the story doesn't seem like a bad guy! Listen again:

"He protected John, considered him a righteous and holy man. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him," – which is something I'd like to have on the pulpit here. "They were greatly perplexed, and yet they like to listen to him," and then it says, after the request was submitted, it says that the king "was deeply grieved, yet out of his oaths and for his guests, he did not want to refuse her." So Herod's more of a multi-dimensional character, perhaps, than we might think, not simply someone who is evil or the bad guy in the story, but someone who likes John the Baptist, someone who respects him as a righteous and holy man, and someone who grieves over him after John's death.

Not so according to Matt Skinner, a professor of New Testament at Lutheran Seminary. He writes, even though Antipas fears John, enjoys conversing with him, and is grieved at the prospect of having him beheaded, he is hardly an outwitted dupe in this

episode. His idiotic pledge to reward his stepdaughter with up to half his kingdom reveals him as arrogant and reckless. He uses power in terrible ways. His unwillingness to risk embarrassment out of regard for his oaths makes him literally shameless. Nothing matters more to him than nursing his own vanity. He will suppress whatever fear of God remains within him, squelch any spiritual curiosity you might experience, and snuff out the life of a prophet, all to protect his own interests.”

Not a very positive assessment of Herod, as you can see. My suggestion would be, yes, of course, he is all these things – but at least in this story, there seems to be more to Herod than meets the eye.

All right. Where does that leave us? Well, it leaves us with one question, the one I said at the beginning *I* would like to ask, and that’s this: Where is the Gospel in all of this? Where is the good news? Where is the message of our salvation? Where is the encouragement for what Ephesians 1:13 calls the “word of truth?”

Again, I turn to Matt Skinner of Luther Seminary. He writes, “Don’t miss the final detail about John’s disciples retrieving his corpse and giving it an honorable burial. Consider the courage required to approach Herod Antipas’s people and request the body, thereby declaring allegiance to John and the movement he led.”

So, do you hear that? The very fact that these followers of John requested the body, put them at risk of being executed as their leader was. “If there’s a hint of good news surrounding John’s death,” Skinner concludes, “it resides in his followers – I love this – who refuse to be intimidated, who refuse to be intimidated.”

John foresaw a different world about to emerge. His disciples advanced that vision through their simple yet difficult act of faithfulness.

Do you find yourself fearful? Do you lack courage in the face of those who, say, intimidate with the threat of physical or political violence? Are you afraid for this country? Do you feel powerless?

I certainly do. If so, then what’s the good news in our gospel reading?

Be empowered. Have courage. Have faith, and remember who you are, as a people of God.

Now. The remaining questions, Bible is the Word of God versus word of truth; and the redemption of Christ through Christ’s blood, are ones I would *happily* discuss outside of the sanctuary, but I do have to keep to my strict limit, mostly, of three minutes per question.

The rabbi has returned! He’s very glad to be back, and he’s very glad to see you once again. Amen.