

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
January 10, 2021
Mark 6:14-29

“I’ll Huff, and I’ll Puff, and I’ll Blow Your House Down?”

Like you, I watched with horror on Wednesday as the events in our capitol unfolded. I never thought I would see the images I did happening in our own country, and I hope I never see them again. I am still trying to process what happened, and I find myself moving frequently between anger and sadness, and fear and despair. But as shocking as the events are, I’m not surprised. This has been brewing for years.

This has been brewing since Trump made baseless claims about President Obama not being a US citizen, a claim that was racist and a lie – and too few people called him on it and that just starting fanned the flames of the fire. The events on Wednesday have been brewing for as long as Trump has been telling the American people that elections he doesn’t win are rigged, and this smoldering fire has been able to grow when, to use the words of President Bush, the “reckless behavior of some political leaders” goes unchecked and “passions have been inflamed by falsehoods and false hopes.” Those were Trump supporters on Wednesday. They were not Antifa or BLM as some conspiracy theorists now claim. They were Trump supporters spurred on by the President of the United States spouting lies and conspiracy theories. And those lies and conspiracy theories are killing us. The idea that alternative facts are somehow facts is killing us. Propaganda parading as news is killing us. Literally. Four people died, and honestly it’s a miracle that more didn’t die. And I’m going to say it and name it: Trumpism is evil and we need to come together and reject it because it’s a threat. It is as bad as the evil that Herod espoused in his day that Jesus stood against time and time and time again. And as Christians, we are called to turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world. Anyone who has been baptized has made that promise and as I said two months ago and will say again, before we are Democrats or Republicans we are Christians, and the only Lord and Savior we claim is Jesus Christ.

Evil is not only found in the demonic but also in the centers of power. The real battle in the story about John's beheading is not a battle between life and death or love and hate that so easily captivates us, it's a battle between political power and prophetic faith. The real struggle is between the baptizer and the king, which is the struggle between truth and power. And while the characters in the story are grotesque and extreme, they ask us to stare into a world of corruption, lust and power that is not as distant as we would like it to be; and the story demands that we ask ourselves how our actions contribute to such a world. We may think Herod is a caricature, but behind the façade we can find anyone – even ourselves.

Years ago, or perhaps only yesterday, the Washington Post quoted a lavishly paid lobbyist who said: "There are only two engines that drive Washington: One is greed, and the other is fear." That's a good description for what's happening in our country and in our story.

The King Herod who orders John's execution is the son of the King Herod who ordered the execution of all the male babies under the age of two; apparently the proclivity to execute people runs in the family. You might recall that *that* King Herod feared the baby Jesus so much, that he ordered the execution of all the male babies in Jerusalem in order to insure the baby Jesus' death. Like his father, the King Herod who beheads John is fearful and a coward, but he has a lot of power-which makes for a bad combination.

Herod, for reasons we don't know, married his brother's wife, which was illegal and considered immoral, a fact John the Baptist doesn't mind reminding Herod and Herodias of, which really bothered Herodias. For reasons also unknown, Herod liked listening to John, but listening to him left him perplexed. He also considered John righteous and holy and protected him, but he feared him. However, none of that mattered, because Herod's insatiable quest for preeminence – having it, keeping it, and flaunting it – would always win the day. As Henry Kissinger once said, "Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac."

Thrown into the mix is Herod's birthday party with lots of drinking, partying, and dancing. He's invited all the town's elite and powerful to his party *and* he wants to impress them. So he brings out his daughter and tells her he will give her whatever she wants, "even half my kingdom". That must have been some dance.

Well, daughter dearest rushes off to Mommy Dearest to ask her opinion, but Mommy Dearest isn't interested in her husband's kingdom, because what she really wants is revenge on John for calling her marriage unlawful. Upon hearing the girl's request for John's head, Herod obliges—because a refusal in front of his guests would embarrass and discredit him. When John's head arrives he gives it to the girl, who in turn gives it to her mother.

At first sight, this story looks like a moral matter. Herod and his wife did something immoral by marrying each other, and then further delved into immoral behavior when they sought revenge and killed John, using their daughter in the process. But in the larger picture it's a story about more than just bad morals; it's a story about how things can go terribly wrong when we put our need to be in control or our need to preserve our own privilege or power ahead of God's desires, and God's ways. And if we're willing to look really deeply into the story, we'll see that it sheds light on the deepest, darkest reality of who we have the potential to be or what we have the potential to do.

It's not hard to see how this story applies to the contemporary world and our country. Because if we don't challenge the Herods of our time, we tacitly endorse what is going on. As someone once said, "All that is required for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing." Given Wednesday's events, we could also add: All that is required for evil to triumph is for some people to aid, abet, and go along to get along.

But Herod, as I said earlier, isn't some caricature we can easily dismiss. In his defense, Herod was trying to negotiate a number of complicated relationships within his household and society, and discovered it's hard to please everyone around him and still uphold his own personal standards. He was at odds with his wife over John the Baptist and at odds with John the Baptist over his wife. He was eager to please his constituents but troubled by his daughter's request for John's execution. He feared John while also admiring him from afar. And he was conscious of how society can shape one's life while he sought some measure of truth to guide his life.

Who among us hasn't faced those same dilemmas and negotiated those same complicated relationships? A high schooler goes along with the lie so he or she can remain popular; an employee witnesses another employee do something

wrong, but he doesn't speak up because he doesn't want to be a snitch. A parent allows a child to throw a temper tantrum time and time again because it's easier than saying "No!" Folks, it's only human to care what others think and to want to please those around us by minimizing conflicts. One need not be Herod to understand what Herod is going through as his birthday party takes an unexpected turn. But there comes a time to choose right from wrong. When Herod chooses his public image over a man's life, John pays the ultimate price.

The consequences of bad faith decision making can be devastating. We saw this on Wednesday. And while I thought the decisions of some lawmakers prior to the storming of the capitol was wrong, there should have been no doubt after the storming of the capitol what side they should have chosen. And yet still some of them chose to be Herod.

William Sloane Coffin Jr. was a fiery preacher and patriot who served our country in the Army in World War II and volunteered for Intelligence Duty in the precursor to the CIA. He was also a great dissenter when he thought the country's policies were morally wrong. Coffin once said: "How do you love America? Don't say my country, right or wrong. That's like saying, 'My Grandmother, drunk or sober.' It doesn't get you anywhere. Don't just salute the flag and don't burn it either. Wash it. Make it clean." (Credo, pp. 83, 84)

What we saw on Wednesday wasn't dissent. It was a mob of insurrectionists dirtying our flag and trying "to take back the country", to use their words. But take it back from what exactly? Democracy? The truth? The rule of law? Dissent is objecting when the very ideals and values we respect and love are forgotten and demeaned. Senator Romney's speech on Wednesday night was dissent. Senator Hawley's was not. The senators and representatives who thought they were dissenting weren't dissenting; they were grandstanding for personal and political gain, and when directly confronted with doing the right thing they showed cowardice. Furthermore, their actions were radical, not conservative. Burning down democracy is no better than the rioters who burn down buildings.

But here's the Good News in our story. Yes, there is Good News. Herod's slaughter of John the Baptist didn't stop the Good News from spreading. In fact, when Herod gets word of Jesus' ability to heal and cast out demons, Herod is so

frightened by it that he first thinks John has come back from the dead to haunt him. Could it be John, he thinks?

It's not John, of course, and Herod realizes that in due time. But Jesus, just like John, will face his own execution at the hands of a ruler who cares more about pleasing his constituents than he does in exercising justice. Both Herod and Pilate act against their "better judgment" and condemn to death innocent men.

But the Good News didn't stop with Jesus, either. And why is that? Could it be that even in the face of evil, his disciples found the courage to speak up on behalf of God's kingdom and God's people. Yes, it is. But it's more than that. It's also because those who followed in the disciples' footsteps, down through the centuries, also found the courage to speak up on behalf of God's kingdom and God's people. And now, that message has come to us, and lives with us. Will we find the courage to speak up on behalf of God's kingdom and God's people? Or will we go the way of Herod, bowing to what is expedient and popular?

Friends, there's no guarantee that Christianity will live forever. Nor is there any guarantee that our country will live forever. Other countries have fallen and their stories fill history books, and other gods' stories fill mythology books. Flannery O'Connor once said: "There is a moment in every story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected even though the reader may not recognize this moment." I would suggest that this is our moment to come together, trusting in the gracious mercy of God, to turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world.

Amen.

Sources:

Statement by George W. Bush on Insurrection at the Capitol, January 6, 2021

Feasting on the Word, Volume 3, Year B, commentary for Mark 6:14-29