



Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 14th, 2024

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

2 Samuel 6:1-5,12-19

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-19

*Lift up your heads, O gates; lift them high, O everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in!
"Who is he, this King of glory?" "The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory!"
(Psalm 24:9-10)*

Today, our minds are on our own nation and on our own leaders, rulers, and candidates for positions of power and authority. Today, we are reeling from the assassination attempt on Donald Trump at a political rally in Pennsylvania, and the deaths and deep injuries of other people. Today, our hearts are heavy and our minds are spinning.

Let us not run down all the rabbit holes of social media, chasing opinions and conspiracy theories. Let us not take the tempting bait of rage or contempt.

We are a people who pray. We are a people who hold all of humanity – friends, enemies, and the unknown – all, before God, pleading for God's mercy, guidance, and help.

Let us pray today for Donald and for God's presence with him. Let us pray today for those who died and were injured at the hands of the shooter. Let us pray today for the shooter. For all, we please for God's mercy.

Let us pray today for our nation. We have had rumblings for over a decade now of deep unrest, deep anger and rising hostility, and we have seen flare-ups of violence in mass shootings, in uprisings, and in mustering of groups to arms. Have we so completely forgotten the blood, the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, in our Civil War? Are we romanticizing hostility and non-compromise and readiness for violence as the ultimate solutions?

Lord have mercy upon us. Christ have mercy upon us. Lord have mercy upon us.

Age after age, we humans fall into fallacies about power and glory and control. Age after age, we pursue fantasies of great unifiers. Age after age, we knock down and undercut and undo leaders, as quickly as we elevate them.

So. Let's talk about kings.

The scriptures this week give us a tale of two kings. A tale of two dances. A tale of two feasts. A tale of two kings who encountered the presence of the living God, and who chose to act in different ways. They are complicated characters, each with plenty of foibles and wrong steps – just as we face with our own presidents through history, our presidential candidates, our judges, and our lawmakers.

Today, in our scriptures from 2 Samuel and from the Gospel of Mark, we hear of King David and of King Herod. And we have in these two biblical texts two very different accounts of two very different kings of Israel. So, today brings us a study in contrasts. The picture is more complex once you dig into the history of the times and of these kings. But still, the contrast is there.

Our world is filled with studies in contrasts – contrasts in how people choose to live, choose to lead, choose to follow.

Let's look at David and Herod next to each other to get a sense of just how different they were and how differently they responded to God and to people around them. We have David, in the moment of the return of the ark of God among the people as a signal of God's full presence with them. And we have Herod, who has heard about the amazing things happening around the countryside by Jesus' power and the power of his disciples – signs of God's presence in the stories of healing and transformation all around him.

There are deep differences in their basic attitudes and dispositions toward God and the world.

- David is absolutely taken with and giving himself over to delight in God, right along with his people. David wants to be close to God and takes joy in God's presence.
- Herod is worried about what he is hearing about God's presence, but does not go out himself to see. Herod is trapped in his own senses of power and fears of lack of power, honor, lust, pleasure – he has an ear for the Holy and keeps John alive because he likes to listen to him and hear things about God, but doesn't know how to take in the confrontation with his own wicked choices that he hears in John's words.

- David fears and loves God. David gives himself fully to this love of God Almighty.
- Herod also has a sense of God and is aware of the power of God in John's words. But Herod does not give himself very much to God's presence or instructive word. And now, he is having a flashback to how he beheaded John after a giddy promise, and is worried about John being raised again and God's presence and power proceeding uncontrolled all around him.

- David draws people together. He sends out invitations and orders to bring 30,000 men of Israel (and women and children) to be part of this great moment of bringing the ark of God home again among the people.
- Herod has withdrawn from his people and is holding up in his palace in the desert, to which he invites only honored guests and people that were considered part of his inner circle, for a party celebrating himself on his birthday.

These are just a couple of differences in attitudes and dispositions that shape how they understand power and choose to act from the power they have been given.

Let's look next at some of the differences in their actions and decisions.

- David joins with his people in dancing as they brought the ark of God in procession to its new place that was once again among the people. And he dances wildly and all his might. He dances as a gift of all his passion and joy to God, along with the people around him dancing with joy and passion.
- Herod makes space for a dance that he and his guests watch – but in which they do not participate themselves. The dance of the girl, Herodias' daughter (Herod's step-daughter), "pleases" Herod and his

guests so much that in his giddiness he promises to give the girl whatever she wants, even up to half of the kingdom.

- Think about it. Herod seems to regard his kingdom not as people, but as his own property. And he feels frivolous with it, ready to give it away on a whim.
- David gives food away freely as part of a feast that was a celebratory offering to God among them. He provides for his people, includes them in the feast, and sends them home with gifts of food.
- Herod holds food for his guests alone, and delivers John the Baptist's head like food on a platter to Herodias's daughter. And this story comes to us in Mark just before the disciples return from their amazing mission, crowds gather around Jesus, and Jesus feeds the multitudes of people who come to see him.

Let's get down to the core difference, which is how each king saw himself in relation to God and to his people.

David is ready to give himself fully to God, and gives fully to the people in his care. He does all of this with passion, with all of his whole being. He, the second king of Israel, has the honor of helping to bring home again to Israel the ark of the covenant, the most holy seat and dwelling of Almighty God.

Herod is caught in the nets of the power-games of his family, including his father before him. He is bound up in ownership and in sending signals of his power and his strength and his security and his wealth. He has inherited the fears of his father before him, and of the emperors of the day and of all the ages before – the fears of being found out, found wanting, and overthrown by a new star that rises.

You might remember that Jesus said to the religious rulers of that age, "Satan cannot cast out Satan. A house divided against itself cannot stand. BUT – if a house is to be plundered, first one must bind the strong man." The whole Gospel of Mark is written from this position, seeing how Jesus unleashed God's power in surprising ways that went to battle with the forces of this world, to bind the strong man, and to free people from the tyranny of sin and oppression.

It is this binding of the strong man that Herod fears. And Herod is afraid like any tyrant that rules by force and cruelty and manipulation, that those opposing forces he has tried to push down, kill, and destroy will rise up again in new places. Herod is afraid of resurrection! Herod is afraid that the one he killed unjustly in a fit of giddy promise and then an attempt to save face before his honored guests – Herod is afraid that this same one he killed has arisen again and will come with vengeance on him. "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." "I am about to be plundered!" "All my falsehood has finally caught up with me."

And Herod is right to be afraid – if he continues to choose to hold himself back from the rising star, the rising tide of God's power that draws all people and things together, that lifts hearts in celebration and joy, that includes all and embraces all. Because this is the power of the kingdom of God that changes the world, that cannot be broken or extinguished, that rises again and again and again. God's power cannot be shut down completely, and will always rise again – and corrupted power fears this the most. Remember in Star Wars, when Darth Vader is having that light saber duel with Obiwan Kenobi. Obiwan says, "If you strike me down, I will become more powerful than you can possibly imagine."

This is the power of God, the power of Christ Jesus the rising One. And it is a power shared and given – a power that brings change through hope, joy, love, and adoration that is shared and given away. In this world of rulers' fears and attempts to control, in this world of people's fears of rulers and attempts to control them, in our own worlds of fears and attempts to control our circumstances and the people around us, there is the very different power of celebration and of proclaiming God's presence, and the power of joining and bringing people together in the lavishness of God's love.

This is the path of the kingdom of God. And it is the way that Jesus arises among and despite the powers of this world – with a new path of power and love and transforming joy that can never be overcome, that draws together all the world, that mends the world, that issues in a new day dawning.

So, friends, dance! Dance, sing, open your hearts wide to God and to others, give generously to others. Let the King of Glory come in, be among us wherever we go, and lead us forth in joy to find God's dwelling among us as that new star rising and new day dawning.