

Hard Hearts

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Date: 18 November 2012

Preacher: Benj Petroelje

[0 : 00] Well, it's a hometown rejection, a resisted mission, and a sordid tale of a beheaded prophet. And this, as we Anglicans like to say, is the word of the Lord.

Maybe I haven't been an Anglican long enough, but when I say this is the word of the Lord, I think you're supposed to say, Thanks be to God. So this is the word of the Lord, and we may have said it unthinkingly, or we may have thought while we were saying it, but thanks be to God, this is the word of the Lord?

This is the word of the Lord? How is a beheaded prophet the word of the Lord? The three stories that we find in our passage tonight in Mark chapter 6, the unbelief of Nazareth, the mission of the disciples, and the story of the beheaded John the Baptist, don't at first glance seem to fit together very well.

And they are anything for us as Christians, but they are anything but for us as Christians easy passages to stomach. They're difficult passages to hear, they're difficult passages to read, and they're difficult passages to preach.

And it's difficult to know how exactly we should look at John the Baptist's head on a platter and be able to say, This, this is the word of the Lord.

[1 : 27] But I think we need passages like this. And I think we need them because they teach us that the gospel doesn't just go forward with complete success, that there is such a thing as resistance to the gospel and such a thing as rejection of God's people.

And given our varying life circumstances, this may or may not resonate more with you, but there is a degree to which we need passages like this because passages like this resonate with our human experience.

We know what it's like to be resisted, and we know what it's like to be rejected. I think we need this passage because it's a reminder that the gospel does not simply move forward with unmitigated success.

If you flip back just a few pages to Mark chapter 1, and you just allow your eyes to skim through the pages of what we have already done, it will become quickly apparent to you that the gospel as it has gone forward has actually done quite well.

There have been relatively few instances where the gospel has met resistance. There are the Pharisees, and there are Jesus' mother and brothers, but so far, in the words of Jesus' teaching in Mark 4, the gospel has gone forward and it has found relatively fertile soil.

[2 : 47] And after the incident with Jesus' mother and brothers in Mark chapter 3, we have two sections, one in which is full of Jesus' teaching, one chapter 5, which is full of all of the things that Jesus did that proved the presence of this kingdom that he proclaimed.

In fact, by the time you get to the end of Mark chapter 5, this gospel has gone forward with such startling success that not even death can hold it back. And so the raising of Jairus' daughter by Jesus is sort of the resurrection cherry on top of Jesus' miracle tour that he's been on.

But as our eyes flip over and turn to chapter 6, something different occurs. And I think we need this passage because it reminds us that the gospel meets resistance, that the gospel isn't just good news, it's also scandalous news to some, that this kingdom that John and that Jesus preached is a kingdom that is fundamentally at odds with the kingdoms of this world.

And that pain and suffering and resistance and rejection and, yes, even death are not antithetical to the kingdom that Jesus preached.

They're the very way into it. And I think we need a Bible that speaks honestly about this. It doesn't just speak optimistically about where the gospel goes and about who Jesus is, but that speaks a word of hope, yes, a word of hope, but that speaks it realistically, that speaks to the experience of

the fact that sometimes when Jesus is preached, people say no.

[4 : 24] This is what I think Mark 6 does for us. Not Mark sucks, Mark 6. This is what Mark 6 does for us. Sorry about that, dude. My bad. Yeah, first time? Yep.

This is what Mark 6 does. And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So verse 1. Jesus went away from there, there being the Sea of Galilee, and he came to his hometown, his hometown which was Nazareth, and his disciples followed him there.

And on the Sabbath, Jesus began to preach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished. Mark 6 starts out well. Jesus went to his hometown, they invited him into the synagogue, and they were astonished at his teaching.

And it is astonishment that leads them to ask precisely the right questions. The first questions that they ask are excellent. Where did he get these things? What is the wisdom that is given to him?

And what are these mighty works that are done by his hands? How does he do them? These two questions, in a nutshell, provide a summary of everywhere we have been in Mark's gospel so far.

[5 : 38] They get to the question of Jesus' identity. Who is Jesus? And how is he doing these things that we see him doing?

So Jesus' neighborhood friends, these people that he grew up with, get the questions right, no doubt. But they stumble over the answer.

And it's the last two questions that Jesus' friends ask that pose the problem. They ask, Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James, and Joseph, and Judas, and Simon?

Are not his sisters with us? Because friends, their familiarity with him means that they aren't actually able to recognize who he really is.

Surely this Jesus, this Jesus who kicked the soccer ball around on the street with our kids, this Jesus who teased our little girls and who sat around the dinner table with us, surely this Jesus can't actually be the one that we're waiting for.

[6 : 41] Can he? I mean, after all, he's just Jesus. In our minds, we have the name Jesus associated with salvation, but for the people of Nazareth, Jesus was just the boy that grew up next door.

And so they took offense at him. First they were astonished, and then they were offended. And I think it's worth stopping and reflecting on this, that for the town of Nazareth, it was the very ordinary, it was the very ordinary nature of Jesus that was a scandal to them.

It was the scandal of the ordinary that caused them to stumble. It was their utter familiarity with the person of Jesus that didn't allow them to actually see him.

And like many modern people, it was their fascination with the unfamiliar that meant that when the very familiar face of Jesus stood before them in the synagogue, they could not see how absolutely fascinating he truly was.

And so Jesus names the reality that he sees in his hometown. Everywhere I go, Jesus says, people receive me and give me honor, except for in my hometown, except among my family, except among these people who know me.

[8 : 01] In the very place that we would expect Jesus to be welcomed, he's rejected. I'll never forget the first time that I preached in front of my parents, and then subsequently the very first time that I preached in front of my three sisters and my brother-in-laws.

N.T. Wright calls preaching something that is profoundly personal, that in 20 or 30 minutes becomes devastatingly public. And the nice part for you is that for most of you, you only see me preaching, and so you see me in public, but you don't know who I am, and you don't know the private bench.

And so it's easy to receive a word in public, and it's not all that strange because you haven't seen me as the boy next door. But imagine being my sisters and watching me preach.

I mean, this is the boy that we dressed up in our dresses, and this is the boy who we put in our heels, and this is the boy who we put makeup on. How can this little brother of ours be preaching this public word?

I mean, this is the little boy who cried when the Chicago Cubs lost Game 7 of the National League Championship Series to the Florida Marlins, and he was in high school. How is this?

[9 : 18] Deep wounds, deep wounds coming out. To state the obvious, friends, I'm not Jesus, and his words were slightly more authoritative than mine.

But I think it might help you see the problem for the people of Nazareth. They knew Jesus too well to know him. They had seen him too often to really see him.

Oh, how hard it is for Nazareth to trust in Jesus. Oh, what a stumbling block Jesus is for the Jews.

And oh, what a scandal Jesus sometimes is for the church.

How ordinary he looks, and how easy it is to dismiss. And so Jesus looks at this, and he marvels at their unbelief.

And the text says that he could do no mighty work there, because there is a mysterious participation when it comes to mighty works between the capacity of Jesus and human faith.

[10:20] In all the preceding miracles of chapter 5, Jesus brought his mighty works to a receptive, faith-filled audience. But in Nazareth, Jesus' capacity to do the work that he came to do was limited by their unbelief.

It is, as one commentator put it, the un-miracle story. It's the story of resistance to the gospel. It's the story of resistance to Jesus. And how does he respond?

Well, he responds in exactly the way that he had planned to, because he knew he was going to be resisted and rejected all along. In chapter 3, Mark says that Jesus appointed the 12 disciples, and he appointed them for two reasons.

First, he just wanted them to be with him. And second, he was going to send them out to preach this gospel of forgiveness. And over the last two chapters, we've seen at various points in the text that Mark is saying that the disciples have done this first thing.

They've been with Jesus. And now, at the first sign that Jesus is facing real resistance and real rejection, Jesus gets on with the work that he brought these disciples to be with him to do, and that's to send them out.

[11:37] Because these disciples are his representatives. Jesus sends them out on mission. And if you're familiar at all with the story of the Bible, this really shouldn't surprise us that Jesus starts here.

Because every time in the Bible, God faces rejection. He always begins small so that salvation might come to all. And so when Adam and Eve reject God in the garden, God walks quietly and stillly through the garden, and he asks Adam and Eve a simple question, Where are you?

And the great story of redemption begins with that question. Nine chapters later, when all of humanity reject God at the Tower of Babel, you flip over to one chapter, one page, and how does God begin this great redemption story?

With one man who will become one nation, that through whom that nation, all the nations will be blessed. And when that nation, who is supposed to be a blessing, rejects God, what does Jesus do?

Or what does God do, rather? He sends one man, who will be the true Israelite, who will do for Israel and for the world what Israel could not do itself.

[12:53] And when Jesus himself is rejected at Nazareth, how does he respond? He sends out 12 disciples, two by two, because when God is rejected, redemption begins a few people at a time.

Redemption begins by two people coming into a town and proclaiming the gospel of God and having authority over sickness and death. This is how God works.

When he's rejected, he begins small so that salvation might come to all people. If this is how God works, then it can be tempting when we read a passage like chapter 6, verses 7 to 13, it can be very tempting to think that what we have here is just kind of a silver bullet missionary method, a strategy for how we ought to go about sending people to the nations.

And so the text says that they were to go with only sandals and no tunic, no bread, no bag, no money, only one tunic, rather. This doesn't sound very tempting to me at all, but to try to adopt this as a missionary strategy would be, I think, to miss the point.

Because the real point of this little section is not about the logistics of the journey that Jesus is sending them on, but it's about the character of the mission that he sent them on.

[14:21] And what is the character of this mission? Well, among other things, it's central to the character of this mission that this mission and these disciples are going to face rejection.

You see, if Jesus can be rejected at Nazareth at the beginning of chapter 6, then his disciples not only can, but will be rejected in chapter 6, verses 7 to 13.

And they will be rejected because, and we need to hear this as a refrain throughout tonight, they will be rejected because the gospel is not only good news, it is scandalous news.

It is good news. It proclaims the gospel, it proclaims the possibility of healing for you and for me and for all of creation, but it's scandalous news because it calls us to come and to die.

It is good news. It's a kingdom of justice and righteousness and peace, but it's scandalous news because it is a kingdom that is fundamentally at odds with the kingdoms of this world.

[15 : 25] And so, friends, if we're preaching the gospel, the gospel must scandalize this present world precisely because the gospel is good news about a world that is yet to come.

So if the gospel that we proclaim is never being rejected, it might not be the gospel. And if the Jesus that we preach is never being resisted, it might not be Jesus that we actually preach.

And Jesus once again names this. He's honest about it. If the places to which you go, he says to his disciples, reject you, then the kingdoms of this world leave you behind, then wipe the dust off your feet as a symbolic act against them that you are not their judge, but that their judgment will be left to God.

Friends, when the church proclaims the kingdom in word and deed, we should not be surprised when it is resisted and when it is rejected. We don't seek such rejection out, but we don't soften the edges of Jesus to ignore or to run from this conflict either.

Because when the tectonic plates of the kingdom of God bump up against the tectonic plates of the kingdoms of this world, something's got to give.

[16 : 53] we live at a fault line between two worlds and we will be resisted. And this, this is precisely why I think Mark places the story of the death of John the Baptist right here.

In your Bibles, if you look at verses 7 to 13, the disciples go out and then Mark doesn't record their coming back until chapter 6, verse 30. And right smack dab into the middle of that, Mark places the story of the death of John the Baptist.

Why does he do this? Why does he place it right in the middle? I think he does it because John's death serves as a vivid picture, an object lesson, of exactly what Jesus has told his disciples they're going to face.

They will face resistance just as John the Baptist faced resistance. And so imagine the scene that we have in verses 14 to 29. Jesus' disciples have gone out and they've preached the message of this new king and of a new kingdom.

And word reaches Herod, the political ruler, a Jewish leader of Galilee where Jesus is ministering. And he's ruling this area on behalf of Rome. And word of a new king and a new kingdom reaches Herod and no king in their right mind would enjoy word of a new king and a new kingdom sprouting up under their rule.

[18 : 23] And so speculation abounds as to who this Jesus is. Is he John the Baptist raised from the dead? Is he Elijah? Is he another prophet? And Herod thinks he knows. Herod knows that he killed John the Baptist and now he's worried that this Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead.

And so Mark flashes back to this story in which John the Baptist was killed. Herod, a long time before, had taken the wife of his half-brother Philip. Not a good idea if you're living in Israel and you're under the Jewish law.

This would have been something that would have been completely anathema to faithful Jews. Not to mention that no good king would ever take the wife of his brother, especially when that brother is still alive.

And so Herod's wife, and so John, speaks truth to power because the gospel isn't just preached to the minions, it's preached to powerful people too. And so John looks at the king and he says, Herod, you must repent and you must receive forgiveness.

And ironically, it's Herodias, Herod's wife, that doesn't like this very much. And so she waits for an opportunity to exact her revenge, an opportunity that she finds at the lavish party that Herod throws for himself on his birthday.

[19 : 44] And when all the king's men have come in and the wine has flowed and all of these men are happy, Herodias sends out her teenage daughter to do a pleasure, to do a sensual dance for these men and to pleasure them.

And pleasure them, she does. Pleasure them right into a rash vow on the part of a king. A vow he's going to wish that he could take back. And after he makes the vow and after consulting with her mother, the terms are decided.

John the Baptist's head is what this daughter wants and so John the Baptist's head is what this daughter is going to get. And Herod serves up the final course of the meal.

On a silver platter, out comes John the Baptist's head. It's a devastating story. But at its core, I think there is a thread which runs through this story which is a thread of profound hope.

Because it's a story that runs in two directions. And in one direction, this story is an echo and has deep parallels with the story in the Old Testament of Ahab and Jezebel, the story of Elijah and Elijah's confrontation of Ahab and Jezebel.

[21 : 01] And when Elijah confronts Ahab and Jezebel over leading Israel and over their worship of the false god, Baal, Elijah speaks truth to power in the same way that John the Baptist spoke truth to Herod.

And ironically, it's Jezebel, like Herodias, that wants Elijah dead. Now we know from the story that we've been reading that many people have been thinking that Christ might be Elijah, come again. But I think that in a subtle way what Mark is doing by telling this story is he's saying that it's not Jesus Christ who is Elijah, come again, but that it is John the Baptist who is Elijah.

Now why does this matter? Come on, Benj. Is it really a big deal whether John the Baptist or Jesus was Elijah? Actually, it does.

And it matters because of Malachi chapter 4, verse 5. At the very end of the Old Testament, right before God was going to be done speaking to Israel for hundreds of years, he gave Israel one last word through the prophet Malachi in chapter 4, verse 5.

[22 : 20] And he says this to Israel, Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

And so all Israel from Malachi forward was looking for someone like the prophet Elijah, and when they saw the prophet Elijah, they would know that God's final and decisive act of redemption had come.

And then John the Baptist comes on the scene. And Mark says, Friends, I want to introduce you to Elijah.

His name is John the Baptist. And if in John the Baptist we have Elijah, then what does that mean that we have in Jesus Christ?

it means that we have the awesome and the great day of the Lord that has finally arrived. And how is this day of the Lord going to arrive?

[23 : 24] Well, the story doesn't just point backwards, it also points forward. And it has remarkable parallels, this death of John the Baptist, to the crucifixion of Jesus. It was the righteousness of John the Baptist, after all, that attracted both the intrigue and the fear of Herod, just as the righteousness of Jesus Christ attracts the intrigue and the fear of Pilate.

And it was Herod who wavered over the death of John only to finally succumb to the determined and hostile will of Herodias. And in a few short chapters, it will be Pilate who will waver over the crucifixion only to be swayed by the hostile and determined will of an angry crowd.

The disciples of John laid him in a tomb and Joseph of Arimathea will lay Jesus in a tomb. What am I saying? I'm saying that the story of the death of John the Baptist is a story of hope.

The great and awesome day of the Lord, friends, has arrived. But it's a hope that comes with a clear-eyed recognition of the cost of this day, a recognition that the great and awesome day of the Lord will arrive, but it will only arrive through the rejection of Christ.

And if we follow Jesus as a community of people, then we too will experience both of these realities. We'll experience the great and awesome day of the Lord, and we will experience rejection.

[24 : 59] So what we have now, then, is an answer to the question with which we began. Is the way of the kingdom of God easy? Will it move forward with unmitigated success?

No. Profoundly not. In fact, the success of this kingdom is going to depend precisely on its failure. It will depend on the willingness of Christ's church to follow him, follow the way of John the Baptist, and to follow the way of Christ into death and resistance and suffering and rejection, and to do so with hope.

Friends, I know it's not easy to read a passage like this in Canada, where we do not live under the threat of constant persecution and suffering. But I think this is both of our blessing and our curse. For it's possible to become dull in a country like this to the way in which the kingdom of God is meant to bump up against the kingdoms of this world. We live in a tolerant and a friendly culture, but there are ways in which the values of this culture are profoundly anti-gospel, and the church

must name Jesus in the midst of those and expect resistance and rejection.

Two implications, I think, I think of this passage as we read it in this place at this time. First, I hope this passage sharpens our resolve to proclaim a gospel that is both good news and scandalous news.

[26 : 41] Again, we don't seek conflict for conflict's sake, but we don't soften Jesus in order to run from it either. The gospel of Jesus Christ should grate on the ears of the city of Vancouver in very tangible ways.

There are values of this city that are anti-gospel, and the gospel needs to be proclaimed into them. Second, I hope that this passage strengthens our resolve to pray for our brothers and sisters who, even today, are following Jesus to the point of death.

Because there remain in this world kingdoms that are so endlessly bent and intent and hostile to God that they seek to stamp out his light wherever it may be found.

And so I hope we can pray together that they and we would have the courage and the faithfulness in the midst of resistance and rejection and suffering and death to name the gospel of Christ that scandalizes.

Friends, it's a hometown rejection, a resisted mission, and a beheaded prophet. And each of these in their own way point to something that we need to hear.

[28 : 03] That to follow Christ means to face rejection. But take heart, friends, for Christ has overcome the world. And in a few short chapters, crucifixion turns to resurrection and the cross to an empty tomb.

This is the word of the Lord. Amen. Amen. Amen.