

To be in God's Presence!

Today's reading from Mark calls forth several associations for me. One travels back to last week's reading from Mark when Jesus called himself a prophet in midst of a rather hostilely-received visit to his hometown. We hear the same identification of Jesus this week. The activity of Jesus and his disciples has led some to believe Jesus is a prophet. Jesus is certainly more than this, with the rumor mill in our reading from Mark missing much about him, but Jesus is still a prophet. And one of the things prophets do is bring us into the presence of God. Getting it straight from God's mouth, prophets are bearers of God's word. Prophets are oracles. The word of God comes out of their mouths in unedited form and enters our air space; putting us in the presence of God; putting us in the presence of God. When John the Baptist, another prophet addresses Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, the king is in the presence of God. How should he respond? How should we respond when we ourselves are in the presence of God?

Questions of this sort bring me to another one of the associations our reading from Mark calls forth for me. When Herod Antipas is in the presence of his niece Salome, who has become his step-daughter by way of a marriage John the Baptist condemns, he says to her, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." This reminds me of the hymn "Take My Life, that I may be." Its first verse goes like this. "Take my life, that I may be consecrated, Lord, to thee. Take my moments and my days. Let them flow in ceaseless praise."

Generally speaking, we sing those words when we're in the presence of God. When we gather in the name of Jesus, God is there. It's the promise Jesus, God-in-the flesh, makes in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew. "Where two or more are gathered in my name, I am there among them," he says. Later in the 28th chapter of Matthew, Jesus also says that until the end of the age he will be with the Church that teaches the nations about him. Well, what do we do when we get together to sing hymns like "Take my life, that I may be?" We talk about Jesus. We teach and preach Jesus. We sing, pray, and confess Jesus. Through the sacrament of holy communion, we also eat and drink Jesus. And should there be a baptism, we also bathe in Jesus, are washed clean in Jesus, and die and rise again with Jesus. To come to the place where we sing hymns and do a lot of other stuff as well is to be in the presence of God. And how should we respond to the presence of God. By living the words: Take my life that I may be consecrated Lord to thee. Take my moments and my days. Let them flow in ceaseless praise." Devotion to God and God's alternative way of life is how to respond to the presence of God. To be in the presence of God is hopefully, as our reading from Ephesians says, to live for the praise of God's glory; meaning to live for the furtherance of God's alternative vision for life.

This brings me to another one of the associations our reading from Mark calls to mind for me. After King Herod Antipas pledges to give Salome anything for which she asks, he goes on to say he'll give Salome half of his kingdom. This pledge, as misguided as it is, calls to mind the more positive example of Zacchaeus. Do you remember Zacchaeus? His story is featured in the nineteenth chapter of Luke. We rarely hear about Zacchaeus in worship because the scheduled reading of his story conflicts with the celebration of Reformation Day. But perhaps we remember Zacchaeus from Sunday school or from devotional reading of the Bible.

Zacchaeus is a greedy, dishonest tax collector who comes into the presence of God by way of Jesus and pledges to give half of his kingdom, half of his possessions, to the poor. In concrete terms, this is how we live for the praise of God's glory. We do right by our neighbors. We do right by our relationships. We do right by our communities. We live righteously. We don't adversely impact the wellbeing of others, as Herod Antipas does when he takes his brother's wife and when he deprives a prophet named John the Baptist of his head. But we don't just avoid the bad. We also contribute to the wellbeing of others when we have the means to do so, as Zacchaeus does when he pledges to give half of his kingdom or possessions to the poor and as David does when he shares the leftovers of the sacrifice he offers in the praise and presence of God with the whole multitude of Israel in our reading from 2nd Samuel.

Speaking of David, he brings me to another one of the associations our reading from Mark calls forth for me. As Mark tells it today, Herod Antipas' trip down a very unrighteous path is set off by the dancing of his niece/stepdaughter Salome. The combination of dancing and Herod Antipas' unrighteous behavior certainly could be used to argue that there's no room for dancing and other energetic and expressive forms of praise in the life of the Church, whether we're in or out of the presence of God. David and our reading from 2nd Samuel tell us otherwise.

Twice we're told that David danced with all his might in the presence of the Lord. Quite clearly, praise doesn't have to be quiet. Praise can be joyful and exuberant. Praise can be lively and loud. Praise is, in the end, after all, not just a matter of the head, but also a matter of the heart. And when the presence of God excites our hearts, the example of David tells us we may not be able to contain ourselves. It may be time to dance. It may be time to raise an alleluia or an amen. It may be time to clap or to sway or to raise our hands as some Christians are more apt to do than we Lutherans generally are. I think the whole key is that such responses to the presence of God be unforced and genuine. As we respond to the presence of God, there's only one necessity and that's faith active in some form of commitment to God's neighbor-loving, world-loving way. Such faith can be quiet as a church mouse. It can also become a whirling dervish like David. The key will be found in remaining true to the Spirit's particular call upon our individual hearts and heads.

In my own case, as time has moved along, I've become more comfortable with forms of praise like those offered in our reading from 2nd Samuel. The use of what's often misleadingly called contemporary Christian music would have once been unthinkable for me. It is no longer. The same is true of the use of sound clips and videos drawn from popular culture. I once argued with a presenter who argued for the use of movie clips in worship. I wouldn't do it anymore. The bottom line is that all art is spiritual and amenable to our purposes in worship, even if the artist doesn't know it or intend it. But even with the growth and change I've referenced, I'm still the little boy who learned how to sing sitting in a church pew with his mother at Immanuel-Trinity Lutheran Church in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. This brings me to the final association our reading from Mark calls forth for me.

In our reading from Mark, Herod Antipas initially greets the presence of God in the prophet John the Baptist with awe and wonder. This awe and wonder in the presence of God reminds of a hymn often sung at the congregation of my youth. Entitled "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence," it begins like this. "Let all mortal flesh keep silence and with fear and trembling stand. Ponder nothing earthly-minded, for with blessing in his hand Christ our God to earth

descending comes full homage to demand.” Quite clearly, there’s also a time for silent, stationery awe and wonder as we live for the praise of God’s glory. Paying attention to the Spirit’s unique call upon our individual hearts and heads will tell us when it is, just as the Spirit’s call upon the same hearts and heads will tell us when it’s time to be more energetic and expressive in our praise. But again, through it all, the key will be responding to the presence of God with devotion; with faith active in some form of commitment to God’s neighbor-loving, world-loving way.

Amen!