

Sermon for Sunday, July 11, 2021 - "Good News for Real Lives"

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

So, clearly, the Bible is not a bunch of Disney fairy tales. In case we had any doubt, this troubling Gospel reading today drives home that point. The Bible is not a collection of happily ever after endings. It's not a bunch of simple moral lessons where good is rewarded and evil is punished. If it was, this strange story about John the Baptist would have a very different ending.

A corrupt king has no regard for the well-being of the community or other people and takes his brother's wife as his own. John, a good and upright man, speaks truth to power. He takes a stand and does the right thing. This brave stance angers Herod's wife, Herodias. She holds a grudge. She plots against John. She uses her daughter to get back at him. Herodias is the classic wicked witch of Disney fairy tales. And this is a classic good vs. evil story. But the ending is all wrong.

The head of Herodias should land on a platter, not John's! She should be thwarted. There should be some twist of fate so that the villain is the one who ends up dead. Herod should see the error in his ways and make John the chief moral officer of the realm. If this was a Disney story, it would all play out very differently.

But the Bible is about real people and the real world, not Disney characters. And as strange as this story may seem at first, it has a lot in common with life as we know it. In our real lives, bad things happen to good people. Innocent people are detained, tortured, and killed. Corruption is not easily fixed. Speaking truth to power is rare and risky and often futile. Women are treated as possessions, their voices are ignored. Young girls are used as objects.

In real life, we have more in common with the villains than we'd like to admit. We distance ourselves from people who tell us things we'd rather not hear. We worry about losing face and impressing others. We choose to be comfortable and at ease instead of advocating for others. We seek revenge. And there are no neat and tidy endings to all of this, not in the Bible and not in real life.

Our culture has tried to make the Bible and Christianity into a kind of morality tale. If you do good and have enough faith, then God will bless you and protect you and you will live happily ever after. But that isn't how the life of faith works. That isn't the good news of the Gospel. The good news is that God has entered the real world in the person of Jesus. Jesus has experienced all the pain, sorrow, evil and sin of this world. He was truly innocent, yet he was betrayed, abandoned, tortured, and killed. This means there is nothing that we face, nothing in our real lives that our God does not know intimately. God knows all the pain of this world.

And now, by the power of the resurrection, Jesus is not contained to life 2,000 years ago, but is alive and present in each of our own lives now. By the power of the resurrection nothing, not even death, can keep God from being present for us, from working new life for us. By the power of the resurrection, God is present with immigrant children in detention centers, with those languishing in prison who have been wrongly convicted, with women caught up in human trafficking. By the power of the resurrection, God is present in our own broken lives, empowering us to show up with love and faithfulness in our world.

Sometimes we interpret Jesus' resurrection as a fairy tale ending. It all worked out well for him. We will all go to heaven and live happily ever after. Yet the good news of the resurrection is about so much more than heaven one day. The good news of the resurrection is that God disrupts the pain of this world from the inside to work new life for this world. The good news of the resurrection is that God liberates us and raises us to new lives of love and faithfulness here and now. These lives aren't easy and comfortable, yet resurrection empowers us to experience and share God's gifts of peace and wellbeing. Resurrection is God's gift of abundance and healing and wholeness for all creation.

Resurrection sounds like all of us singing together after a year of isolation. It looks like how the family of Ben Splichal Larson works to share his beautiful music with Christ's church, music that assures us of God's presence in all things. Resurrection smells like people baking krumkake to celebrate community and raise funds for mission work. Resurrection looks like the Antiracism Task Force working to disrupt the white supremacy that keeps us bound. It sounds like small groups gathering to reconnect and talk about what God is doing among us now. Resurrection looks like the people of Cedar Falls area Fredsville Lutheran Church coming together to clean up its cemetery that was vandalized recently.

We don't get happily ever after endings.

We do get resurrection.

We get Jesus present in everything that our real lives hold.

We get God working new life always.

We have all that we need to live with hope and courage in this real world.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.