ROCKS AND HARD PLACES
Scripture: Ephesians 1:3-14 and Mark 6:14-29

FOCUS: We often face difficult decisions and are called to heed God’s Spirit as we decide.

Jesus has been spreading the gospel message and bringing wholeness to broken people. The twelve disciples have been empowered and sent out to be vulnerable messengers of the divine Spirit and to continue the healing and wholeness ministry Jesus began. The works and words of both Jesus and his followers have become the talk of the town. Herod had certainly heard and seen, and he was impressed. He knew that the one who was behind all of this had to be someone special. He was both intrigued and more than a little uneasy. The most impressive person he had ever encountered, the only one he could imagine performing such works and having authority to empower others to do so was John. Could this man be a resurrected Jesus? Herod couldn’t help but think back to the occasion of John’s demise.

John’s record was impeccable. Though more than a bit peculiar, he was a righteous and holy man and it showed in everything he did and was reflected in all he said. People had flocked to him, had resonated with his remarkable message of hope and had been moved to action by his call to repentance. Herod had surely struggled with that repentance thing. Like all of us, he understood that with repentance must come change and behavior modification. He knew he needed to make some changes, in fact it was John himself who had confronted Herod about a glaring moral failure.

Herod had succumbed to his wandering eye and active hormones and had cultivated a, shall we say, intimate relationship with Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife whom he had eventually married. It was John who had called Herod to task over the relationship. Suffice it to say Herodias was not pleased with John’s meddling in her affairs, pun intended. As for Herod, the whole matter made him uncomfortable. He was struggling to balance various influences with conflicting priorities, none of which were compatible.

As are most politicians, especially those who serve at the whim of an autocratic regime, Herod was quite conscious of public opinion and how important maintaining order and peace was to his keeping power. He certainly would not want to be the subject of scandalous rumors. But in John Herod sees one who is a threat to his credibility. John has the potential to bring scandal, but it would be no rumor he would speak, it would be the truth. Not that John was a trouble maker, nor was he out to get Herod. John was just that inconvenient kind of guy who was not afraid to speak truth to power. He had spoken truth directly to Herod, told the king point blank that he was wrong to have married Herodias.

There had been no threat to expose Herod or to stir up the people but Herod feared something might come of the matter. He was conflicted as he was whenever John came around. There was something about this odd fellow’s presence which was unsettling. The Message paraphrase tells us ***“Herod was in awe of John. Convinced that he was a holy man, he gave him special treatment. Whenever he listened to him he was miserable with guilt and yet he couldn’t stay away. Something in John kept pulling him back.***

Miserable with guilt yet unable to stay away. Haven’t we all been there? Are we not all at times like Herod? We know what we ought to do. Something deep within is clearly telling us, yet we are conflicted. As Paul so famously said***, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”*** Like Paul, we give in to our baser instincts and do what is expedient, what is pleasurable, what brings short term reward. Yet even as we make our choices we struggle with that nagging feeling and like Herod who was drawn back to John we are drawn back to that nudge from our conscience.

Or is it just conscience. I am convinced that there are times when I have those experiences that it is not just conscience but is the work of the Spirit of Christ. To be sure conscience is a tool which God’s Spirit can and does use. But there is something about that recurring nudge, that deep down encounter which is more than conscience. It is that gut feeling that just will not go away. If we ignore it long enough our conscience can be silenced. We can even convince ourselves that it spoke falsely to us, especially when to ignore it is to our temporary benefit. That is not the case with God’s Spirit. God will never give up on us, will never be silenced, though we will always have the choice to ignore what God speaks to us. Despite the fact that the Spirit continues to make me uncomfortable daily. I am eternally grateful that God refuses to be silenced.

Concern over public opinion and uneasiness over his relationship with John were stressing Herod. And there was more. There was Herodias, his wife. She was not at all conflicted concerning John, she just wanted him out of the picture. The Message says ***“Herodias, smoldering with hate, wanted to kill him.”*** We find Herod firmly caught between a couple of rocks and a hard place. He fears his career could be jeopardized were details of his indiscretions to become public knowledge. His wife has made it crystal clear that she wants John executed and she knows her husband has the power and the authority to handle that matter. Still, there is that nagging voice from within which will not let him forget the words of condemnation from a righteous man who both perplexed and fascinated him. So Herod decided to do the best he could to please everyone and to save his neck as well as John’s. He had John arrested. That way he could be assured that the rumor mill would be shut down and hopefully Herodias would be satisfied that, while John still had breath, he was now out of the way.

But things didn’t go according to Herod’s plan. They rarely do when one seeks to please everyone. We discover that Herodias was not at all placated by John’s incarceration. We also learn that Herod was a bit reckless with his promises. It had been a lively gathering, a particularly festive occasion accompanied most certainly with much food and wine. We have read the story. Pleased by the display of his dancing daughter’s talent, his judgement most likely a bit impaired by the wine, Herod promised to give her whatever she asked in gratitude, even half of his kingdom. He certainly had no idea she would come up with the horrendous request of which we have read this morning.

Here again we find Herod caught between a rock and a hard place. He must make a decision, one which will have momentous consequences either way. On the one hand he could choose to do the expedient thing for the moment. He had made a public pronouncement that he would honor any request. In his mind his integrity was at stake, not to mention the status of his home life. Were he to refuse the request of his daughter his credibility and integrity could be called into question. After all he had made a big, public deal of granting the wish. And were he to refuse, he would surely face the wrath of Herodias in the privacy of their palace.

But there was still that gnawing from within. John was a good, godly man. He had done nothing wrong. It was Herod who was guilty, and he knew it. Mark tells us that ***“the king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.”*** What a sad verse. Caught between the rocks of pleasing others, preserving his status and keeping the peace at home and the hard place of doing what, deep within, he knew to be right he chose the rocks. There would have certainly been consequences had he refused. But his soul would have still been intact and he would have known that inexplicable peace and joy which come only from doing the right thing even if there are to be consequences.

Over time, Herod forfeited his destiny. I speak not of his power and position, he did everything possible to keep that intact, and that was his downfall. Herod was destined by God, as are we all, for great things. But the greatness for which God destines folks rarely has to do with political power and worldly status. As we consider our destiny, and think about what godly greatness looks like, we turn to our text from the letter to the church in Ephesus.

Let’s talk destiny first. Some see passages like this affirming predestination. But there is a significant difference between being destined and being predestined. I am certain that Herod was destined for good things, that God intended for him to do good and to remain faithful. But Herod, like all of us, was granted free will. And Herod chose not to live into his destiny. I will be quite honest here, if I had to believe in predestination, the idea that God programs every event, every action, if I had to believe that in order to be Christian, I would not be here this morning. How in the world could a God whose very nature is love wake up one morning and decide that this was the day that John, a righteous and holy man would get his head served up on a platter because someone was irate at having had her illicit affair called what it was.

If you really believe in the most severe theories of predestination you must believe that. Such theology is born out in the proclamations of those who declare that natural disasters are God’s retribution for specific sins, and in misguided statements at times of tragedy that seek to comfort by proclaiming things like, ***“Well, God just needed her more than you right now.”*** The God in whom I trust is a God of love not vengeance, is selfless, not selfish and would never take away a loved one because God needed them. Ours is the God who the Ephesians were told ***“has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.”*** Heads on platters and untimely deaths don’t look much like blessings to me and I am convinced that neither do they to God. God would never cause such horrors, but God does allow them. That is simply free will.

Having declared that God has blessed us, the writer of Ephesians then proclaims that God has destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ. There is that distinction again. God destined us for adoption, that is our destiny, but we are free to forfeit it. There is a less extreme view of predestination which avoids the pitfall of claiming God causes every action and word. Those who ascribe to it would argue that we do indeed have free will, but that God has chosen before birth those who will be redeemed and those who will not. Frankly such theology is not much less offensive to me than the radical version. I cannot imagine that the God whose nature is love would decide before we were born that John Soto is in and John McCullough is out. Henri Nouwen writes ***"If I am chosen, that doesn't mean that others are not chosen. When I really receive this gift of being God's beloved, I look around and see that all others are beloved, too!"*** That is the essence of our destiny. We are all chosen, as are all the other billions of souls who have ever lived, are now living or ever will live. And we are all destined for glory, if we will choose it. Therein lay the rub for Herod He didn’t choose it.

So what is this common destiny? Our epistle text, remember epistle simply means letter, speaks of it in wonderful fashion. Because of God’s grace we have been offered redemption and forgiveness and have access to wisdom and insight. The author then tells us that it is God’s plan to gather up all things to himself. Again there is that universal destiny theme. That is what God wishes more than anything. God doesn’t want to keep anyone out and God’s heart breaks when we, like Herod, turn our backs on our destiny.

The writer goes on to define that life gathered up. We are told that we have an inheritance in Christ. That inheritance is to live according to the purposes of God in Christ. Richard Rohr has written, ***“God isn’t looking for servants. God isn’t looking for slaves, workers, contestants to play the game or jump the hoops correctly. God is simply looking for images! God wants images of God to walk around the earth…. God wants useable instruments who will carry the mystery, who can bear the darkness and the light, who can hold the paradox of incarnation—flesh and spirit, human and divine, joy and suffering, at the same time, just as Jesus did. Watch what Jesus does, and do the same thing!”*** That my friends is our destiny. You may take it or leave it. But I recommend you take it!

Herod found himself between a couple of rocks and a hard place. There was the rock of his intransient desire to be in charge, to be liked, to remain powerful, to please others. There was the rock of wanting to preserve some semblance of peace at home. And there was the hard place of an inconvenient truth, of a better way which kept gnawing at his soul but which he could not bring himself to embrace, the way of grace. That grace was offered to Herod as is it to all. But Herod chose the way of the rocks.

The choices were not easy for Herod and neither are they for us. But while the way of the rocks can at times be quite appealing, its rewards are, in the end rocky, temporary and fleeting. The way of the hard place is aptly named. It is not always easy. It does, as Bonhoeffer has said, require a kind of death, a death to self and selfishness so that we might live for God and God’s children. It is a death Herod could not accept. But it is a death which leads, not to demise, rather to new life, abundant life, eternal life, life as life was originally created to be.

For your sake, for the sake of a world filled with those in danger of abandoning their destiny and for the sake of the kingdom of the one who would have us all in the fold, may you choose the hard place. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.