

HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING

In Scripture and Prayer and The Great Cloud of Witnesses

Week of July 14, 2024

Collect for Proper 10

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.** BCP

231

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19 NRSV, 1989

In our Hebrew scripture reading King David sets out to bring the ark of the covenant into the new royal city of Jerusalem. The ark proceeds into the city that David has captured with extravagant liturgy and is set in a tent that he has prepared. David leads the procession in exuberant dance. One of his wives, Saul's daughter Michal, perhaps representing the old order which David is replacing, despises him. With the arrival of the ark, Jerusalem becomes both the cultic and religious center of David's kingdom.

David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. They carried the ark of God on a new cart and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart with the ark of God, and Ahio went in front of the ark. David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

It was told King David, "The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him because of the ark of God." So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing, and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatted calf. David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the trumpet. As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, and she despised him in her heart. They brought in the ark of the LORD and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD. When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.

Exploring 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

2 Samuel. At one time, the first and second books of Samuel formed a single book. They were separated in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Septuagint (about 250 BC). 1 Samuel begins with the story of Samuel: hence the name. 2 Samuel tells the story of David's rule, first as he gradually gained control of the whole of Judah (the south), and then when he was king of both Judah and Israel (the north.)

When was the last time you danced before the Lord? That your joy of being in God's presence was so overwhelming, that you started to boogie? The psalmist tells us to praise God in God's temple with dancing ([Ps. 150:4](#)). For some Christian groups, dancing is associated with the devil or equated with sin. Others who belong to reserved cultures, reacting like David's wife Michal, dismiss any expression of physical rejoicing by simply stating, "We do not do that here. We never have done it that way. Our fathers never danced before God."

David, while moving the ark of God, which he believed to house the very presence of the Lord, was so overcome with joy and delight that he stripped down to his undergarment and started leaping and twirling before God. When was the last time your minister or priest danced as King David? David must have looked like a drunken fool, a staggering buffoon, but David was not dancing to impress humans. He was dancing as an expression of joy that God was real and present in his life. Personally, I could not hold a tune if my life depended on it. I am the only member of my family who is not musically inclined. However, when we sing the hymns of the faith, I sing at the top of my lungs, to the consternation of my family members. I do not sing to please them or anyone else (not a difficult task considering that my singing voice is quite unpleasant); I sing for joy to be in God's presence.

What would happen if your parish or congregation, during a Sunday morning service, were to break out in dance? If instead of following the order of worship, those in the congregation would be so moved by the preaching that they started to dance for joy? Such emotional expressions may be more common among our charismatic and Pentecostal sisters and brothers, but for many mainline traditions, such demonstrations of joy would be frowned upon. Is it because we have allowed our culture to shape how we worship God, rather than letting the presence of God shape our worship? Why do we allow socially constructed customs and traditions to influence how we come before the Lord? Worse, what occurs when we begin to believe that our particular style of worship is closer to truth than some other groups' worship style?

I am not calling for all churches to incorporate dancing. Rather, I am cautioning against prohibiting a form of joyful expression, lest we find ourselves in the company of Michal. Our cultural need to control events all too often stifles the very presence of God from being manifested. Sometimes congregations prohibit expressions of joy—dancing, drumming, guitars, instruments, modern music, and so forth—as if their inclusion somehow violated God's will. Our churches would be revolutionized if we were to allow God's people to worship freely, without restraints.

Those who historically have been (and still are) colonized by Eurocentric Christian religious interpretations and traditions often dismiss their own indigenous worship styles so as to imitate the dominant culture, believing that their cultural norms are somehow inferior to Eurocentric religious forms. In so doing, they confuse a genuine expression of reverence for God with a manufactured reverence for the dominant culture. How can this particular Latino sing 300-year-old Germanic hymns unto the Lord? While I do appreciate them, they remain incongruent to my very being. Not worshiping my God through my *coritos* makes me inauthentic before the Lord. This is not to say there is something wrong with 300-year-old Germanic hymns. If I were of German descent, they would be very meaningful, but I am not. Let us learn to sing to the Lord with our own voices and languages and to dance through our own rhythms and movements.

The text tells us that once the rejoicing ended, King David distributed among the people a roll of bread, a portion of dates (or meat), and a raisin cake. Worship—no matter how exuberant it may

be—absent praxis (action) is worthless. King David, the richest and most powerful man in the land, understood he had an obligation to those around him. Like Jesus centuries later, he fed the multitudes. While not everyone in the crowd was poor, no doubt many were. The food provided needed nourishment.

King David, during the procession that brought God’s ark to Jerusalem, sacrificed an ox and a fat sheep every six paces. The blood of holocausts filled the streets, but God, according to the prophet Isaiah, is revolted by such blood sacrifices. The smoke of worthless offerings fill God with disgust ([Isa. 1:11–13](#)). What is true worship then? According to Isaiah, to cease evil, learn to do good, search for justice, help the oppressed, and plead for those who are most disenfranchised—in those times, the orphan and the widow ([Isa. 1:16–17](#)).

Dancing before God may provide space for a deep spiritual connection with the Author of the universe; but true worship is to seek justice, to physically—not solely spiritually—feed the hungry. There is something theologically wrong with those who ignore the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the alien, the incarcerated, and the infirm. Creative worship expressions may provide a sense of being close to God; but only when we touch the oppressed and dispossessed do we actually touch God. That which we do to the very least of these, we do unto God. Dancing is always fun; nevertheless, it is in the doing of justice that we get to enter into God’s presence. Then we have something to dance about.

“Theological Perspective (2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b–19),” in *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Additional Essays*, vol. 33, *Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 1–5.

Psalm 24 NRSVue, 2021

As pilgrims go up to God’s holy place for worship, they cleanse themselves and praise the just Lord, who has created all things.

- 1 The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it,
- 2 for he has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers.
- 3 Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?
- 4 Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false and do not swear deceitfully.
- 5 They will receive blessing from the LORD
and vindication from the God of their salvation.
- 6 Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob. *Selah*
- 7 Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in!
- 8 Who is the King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle.
- 9 Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in!
- 10 Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory. *Selah*

Exploring Psalm 24

Psalms is a collection of collections. The psalms were written over many centuries, stretching from the days of Solomon's temple (about 950 BC) to after the Exile (about 350 BC.) Psalms are of five types: hymns of praise, laments, thanksgiving psalms, royal psalms, and wisdom psalms. Within the book, there are five "books"; there is a doxology ("Blessed be ... Amen and Amen") at the end of each book.

Pastoral Perspective

By Steven A. Peay

[Psalm 24](#) is a text designed for liturgical use, most likely a procession of some sort. It continues to serve that function in the Christian East, especially in the Syrian Orthodox liturgy for Easter. The clergy and people leave a darkened church and begin to process around it. They do this three times, singing [Psalm 68](#), "Let God arise ..." as they go. After the Gospel for matins is read, the priest knocks on the door of the church, beginning a dialogue, which is taken from [Psalm 24:7–10](#). The priest says, "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors! That the King of glory may come in." A voice comes from behind the closed doors (most often the sacristan, who is lighting the lamps) and asks, "Who is the King of glory?" The priest responds with the words of the psalm, and so it goes until the final response to the question, "the LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory." The priest announces to the people, "He is not here. For he has risen as he said." The people enter the church, now ablaze with light, singing to the risen Lord. They have come to worship.

[Psalm 24](#) is a liturgical piece, but one with distinct theological purposes. Its first purpose is to identify God as the owner of the world, which it does by asserting, "The earth is the LORD'S and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers" (vv. 1–2). Secondly, the psalm recognizes those who may come into the presence of the Lord to take part in worship. The psalmist poses questions of worthiness and then answers them. Only those "who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully" (v. 4) are suitable to enter into the presence of the Holy One. Finally, the psalm names God as the King of glory, using a question-and-answer litany.

The psalmist's three purposes serve a helpful function for all who would come to worship God. How often do we approach worship, not with God in mind, but the week we have had? How many times do we leave worship worried, not if we have worshiped God, but if we have been spiritually fed? [Psalm 24's](#) opening verses pull us up short, calling us back to a sense of our creatureliness and dependence on the One who owns the world and sets the waters flowing.

Those who would come to worship must take stock not only of their relationship to God, but also of their relations with fellow human beings. Those of the "company ... who seek [God]" (v. 6) and know the blessing of the seeking have to live a certain way. Benedict Janecko, OSB, writes,

These prerequisites to enter for worship centered around moral qualities that emphasized social, communal, corporate concerns more than individual piety or private concerns.... All liturgy and sacrifice is related to the treatment of our neighbor.... These entrance requirements stem from the Torah, the heart of the

Jewish Scriptures. They are appropriate as an examination of conscience at the gate or door (Tor in German) of the Temple. Torah testing at the Tor is the price of admission and one's passport to the inner sanctuary and inner life with God.[1]

To come into the presence of God, then, means that we have examined our life and heart first. Perhaps this was on Jesus' mind as he preached the Sermon on the Mount and said, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" ([Matt. 5:23–24](#)).

Pastorally, [Psalm 24](#) serves as an examination of the worshiper's conscience. As one prepares for worship, the three points the psalmist raises offer useful instruction and an opportunity for prayerful reflection. First, we remind ourselves of the One we come to worship (mindful that the meaning of the word "worship" is to "ascribe worth"). We recognize that God is the creator and that we are not, and in so doing we renew our faith. Second, we examine ourselves and how we have lived up to this moment of worship. Now we ask ourselves if we have sought to live as God would have us live. Righteousness, justice, steadfast love, and faithfulness are the attributes of the One to whom we offer worship, yet they are also to mark the life of the worshiper as well. Third, we again acknowledge the lordship of the King of glory, as we bid the ancient doors be lifted up!

Attempts to become relevant in the face of contemporary culture have caused many a church to engage in so-called worship wars. Our liturgical use of [Psalm 24](#) may never involve a dialogue with someone behind a closed door. However, the issues raised by the psalm should engage us in an interior dialogue whenever we are preparing to worship, whether our liturgical practices are high or low, blended, traditional, or what have you. The psalmist challenges us to look at the very core relationships of faith, life, and worship in a meaningful way. Above all, we are reminded that God is God, and we are the ones who come to offer worship, because worship is not about us, but about the One who is alone worthy to receive it. [Psalm 24](#) does not let us forget that worship must be grounded in faith and lived out in daily practice if we are to enter the precincts of the King of glory. For only the one who comes believing, with clean hands and heart, will see those ancient doors lifted up.

[1] Benedict Janecko, OSB, *The Psalms: Heartbeat of Life and Worship* (St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press, 1986), 62–63.

"Pastoral Perspective (Psalm 24)," in *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Additional Essays*, vol. 33, *Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 7–11.

Ephesians 1:3-14 NRSVue, 2021

In this reading Paul praises God for the glorious inheritance that has been ordained for those who are now the children of God. Redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ, our freedom from sin is made possible. Now we share in the mystery of God's plan to form a universal community in association with Christ. In all this we have the Holy Spirit as a kind of pledge or down payment for the fullness of the heritage to come.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:1-2)

6

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ
 4 with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,
 5 just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless
 6 before him in love.
 7 He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good
 8 pleasure of his will,
 9 to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.
 10 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses,
 11 according to the riches of his grace
 12 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight
 13 he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he
 14 set forth in Christ,
 15 as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and
 16 things on earth.
 17 In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the
 18 purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,
 19 so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his
 20 glory.
 21 In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation,
 22 and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;
 23 this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the
 24 praise of his glory.

Exploring Ephesians 1:3-14

Ephesians. This letter of Paul was written from prison, probably in Rome. Whilst the Bible states that it was written to the church at Ephesus, some early manuscripts do not contain an addressee in 1:1. This would imply that Ephesians was a circular letter, sent to a number of churches. If so, it introduced a new idea into letter writing: we know of no other circular letters from this period. This book celebrates the life of the church, a unique community established by God through the work of Jesus Christ, who is its head, and also the head of the whole creation.

Ephesians 1:4-10 and 11-14

By Tom Wright

Paul's great prayer at the opening of this letter is a celebration of the larger story within which every single Christian story—every story of individual conversion, faith, spiritual life, obedience and hope—is set. Only by understanding and celebrating the larger story can we hope to understand everything that's going on in our own smaller stories, and so observe God at work in and through our own lives.

The prayer itself falls into three sections, though each one is tied so closely to the others, and overlaid with so much praise and celebration, that sometimes it's difficult to see what's going on. [Verses 4–6](#) are the first paragraph, following the introductory word of praise in [verse 3](#). [Verses 7–10](#) are the second, and [verses 11–14](#) round the prayer off. Let's look at them in turn.

[Verses 4–6](#) celebrate the fact that God’s people in the Messiah are chosen by grace. This is, perhaps, the most mysterious thing of all. God, the creator, ‘chose us in him’, that is, in the king, ‘before the world was made’; and he ‘foreordained us for himself’.

Many people, including many devout Christians, have found this shocking, or even unbelievable. How can God choose some and not others? How can being a follower of Jesus Christ be a matter of God’s prior decision, overriding any decision or freedom of our own?

Various answers can be given to this. We have to be careful here. Paul emphasizes throughout this paragraph that everything we have in Christ is a gift of God’s grace; and in the next chapter he will declare that before this grace reached down to us we were ‘dead’, and needing to be ‘made alive’ ([2:5](#)). We couldn’t lift a finger to help ourselves; the rescue we needed had to come from God’s side. That’s one of the things this opening section is celebrating.

The second thing, which is often missed in discussions of this point, is that our salvation in Christ is a vital stage, but only a stage, on the way to the much larger purpose of God. God’s plan is for the whole cosmos, the entire universe; his choosing and calling of us, and his shaping and directing of us in the Messiah, are somehow connected with that larger intention. How this works out we shall see a little later. But the point is that we aren’t chosen for our own sake, but for the sake of what God wants to accomplish through us.

This alerts us to the other hidden story which Paul is telling all through this great prayer. It is the story of the Exodus from Egypt. God chose Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to be the bearers of his promised salvation for the world—the rescue of the whole cosmos, humankind especially, from the sin and death that had come about through human rebellion. When Paul says that God chose us ‘in Christ’—the ‘us’ here being the whole company of Christians, Jews and Gentiles alike—he is saying that those who believe in Jesus are now part of the fulfilment of that ancient purpose.

But the story, of course, doesn’t stop there. In [verses 7–10](#) Paul tells the story of the cross of Jesus in such a way that we can hear, underneath it, the ancient Jewish story of Passover. Passover was the night when the angel of death came through the land of Egypt, and the blood of the lamb sprinkled on the doorposts rescued the Israelites from the judgment that would otherwise have fallen on them. The word often used for that moment was ‘redemption’ or ‘deliverance’: it was the time when God went to Egypt and ‘bought’ for himself the people that had been enslaved there. Now, again in fulfilment of the old story, the true ‘redemption’ has occurred. Forgiveness of sins is the real ‘deliverance’ from the real slavemaster. And it’s been accomplished through the sacrificial blood of Jesus.

Telling the story like this—the story of Jesus the Messiah, and the meaning of his death, told in such a way as to bring out the fact that it’s the fulfilment of the Exodus story—is a classic Jewish way of celebrating the goodness of God. Worship, for Christians, will almost always involve telling the story of what God has done in and through Jesus. From the beginning, such storytelling built on the stories of God’s earlier actions on Israel’s behalf. The prayer will now conclude by moving forwards from the Christian version of the Exodus to the Christian version of the promised land.

Take some time, as you ponder Paul's prayer, to reflect on what it meant for him, in prison, to write in praise of the God who has set us free. Then open your heart in prayer on behalf of those who today still long that what God did in Christ might become a reality in their daily lives.

Ephesians 1:11-14

These days, an inheritance is often simply money—or something that can quickly be turned into money. But very often in the ancient world, and particularly in the Jewish world, an 'inheritance' consisted, like the castle and its grounds, of land that was not to be got rid of.

The basic inheritance that God had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was the land of Canaan. All the time that the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, this was the hope that kept them going: the hope that, whatever the turns and twists of the plot in the long-running story, God himself would eventually give them the 'inheritance': not a gift of cash, but the ideal land, the land flowing with milk and honey.

Part of the meaning of the Exodus, therefore, was that they were now free to set off and go to claim their inheritance. They wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, led this way and that by the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. The presence of the Holy One in their midst was dangerous—you would be foolish to grumble or rebel, as some of them found to their cost—but it was the guarantee that they would get there in the end. And they did.

Now Paul tells this part of the story over again, as the conclusion of his long opening act of worship and praise. Only this time, of course, it's the new Exodus, the new inheritance, and the new wilderness wandering. As often in his writings, he sees the church in the present age as doing again what Israel did in the desert: coming out of the slavery of sin through God's great action in Jesus the Messiah, and on the way to the new promised land.

But what is this new promised land? What is the promised inheritance?

The standard Christian answer for many years and in many traditions has been: 'Heaven'. Heaven, it has been thought, is the place to which we are going. Great books like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* have been written in which the happy ending, rather than an inheritance suddenly received from a relative, is the hero reaching the end of this worldly life and going off to share the life of heaven. But that isn't what Paul says, here or elsewhere.

The inheritance he has in mind, so it appears from the present passage and the whole chapter, is the whole world, when it's been renewed by a fresh act of God's power and love. Paul has already said in [verse 10](#) that God's plan in the Messiah is to sum up everything in heaven and earth. God, after all, is the creator; he has no interest in leaving earth to rot and making do for all eternity with only one half of the original creation. God intends to flood the whole cosmos, heaven and earth together, with his presence and grace, and when that happens the new world that results, in which Jesus himself will be the central figure, is to be the 'inheritance' for which Jesus' people are longing.

At the moment, therefore, the people who in this life have come to know and trust God in Jesus are to be the signs to the rest of the world that this glorious future is on the way.

Equally, the sign that they themselves have received which guarantees them their future is the holy spirit. The spirit is to the Christian and the church what the cloud and fire were in the wilderness: the powerful, personal presence of the living God, holy and not to be taken lightly, leading and guiding the often muddled and rebellious people to their inheritance.

But the spirit is more than just a leader and guide. The spirit is actually part of the promised inheritance, because the spirit is God's own presence, which in the new world will be fully and personally with us for ever. (That's why, in some New Testament visions of the future, such as [Revelation 21](#), heaven and earth are joined together, so that 'the dwelling of God is with humans'.) The spirit marks us out, stamps us with God's official seal, as the people in the present who are guaranteed to inherit God's new world.

We see this in [verse 14](#) in particular. The word Paul uses for 'guarantee' [*pledge* in NRSVue] here is a word used at the time in legal or commercial transactions. Suppose I wanted to buy a plot of land from you, valued at 10,000 dollars. We might agree that I would pay you the first 1,000 dollars as a 'down payment', guaranteeing the full sum to come in the future when the details were complete. The spirit is the 'down payment': part of the promised future, coming forwards to meet us in the present.

As this commercial metaphor takes over in verse 14 (the cheerful mixing of metaphors is, I think, one of several signs that this is indeed Paul's work), the implication is that we have placed something we own, or are meant to own, in a pawnshop, and now need to 'redeem' it as our own possession. We shall indeed do this, Paul declares; and the spirit is the sign that we shall one day possess it fully.

Everything, of course, is done 'to the praise of God's glory'. Look back over the story which Paul has told as an act of worship. God has taken the initiative; God has done what was necessary, at great cost to himself, to buy us back from the slavery of sin; God has given us the spirit as a sign and foretaste of the whole renewed cosmos which awaits us as our inheritance. Discovering that you are to receive an inheritance like that should change your whole life. How can you not join in the hymn of praise?

Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 8–14.

Mark 6:14-29 NRSVue, 2021

Our gospel story is of the death of John the Baptist by order of King Herod. John the Baptist's preaching sharply criticized Herod for his marriage to Herodias, who had been the wife of Herod's brother Philip. Herod was intrigued and also fearful of John, but at a banquet at which Herodias's daughter performed, the king rashly promised the girl whatever request she might make. At her mother's prompting, the girl asks for the head of John the Baptist. John's fearlessness, Herodias's brutality, and Herod's expediency thus intersect and lead to John's martyrdom.

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus's name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison

on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests, and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The king was deeply grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Exploring Mark 6:14-29

Mark. As witnesses to the events of Jesus life and death became old and died, the need arose for a written synopsis. Tradition has it that Mark, while in Rome, wrote down what Peter remembered. This book stresses the crucifixion and resurrection as keys to understanding who Jesus was. When other synoptic gospels were written, i.e. Matthew and Luke, they used the Gospel according to Mark as a source. Mark is most probably the John Mark mentioned in [Acts 12:12](#): his mother's house was a meeting place for believers.

Mark 6:14-29

by Tom Wright

Within a decade, Herod had been banished to faraway Gaul, left to die in disgrace in a distant land. Within a generation, John's story had been written up by Mark, honouring him as a fearless witness to the kingdom of God.

Why did John make such a fuss over Herod Antipas' taking of his brother's wife? Not simply, I think, because such a thing was immoral, against the law, and setting a bad example to the Jewish public into the bargain. Herod, following his father, cherished a great ambition: to have the Jews recognize him as their true king. Though with hindsight we can see there was never a chance of this, he must have thought it at least possible. He was completing his father's great project of rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, and this had been closely associated with royalty ever since Solomon built the first temple a thousand years before.

John the Baptist, though, was launching a very different kind of kingdom-movement. His baptism, offering forgiveness of sins, was effectively upstaging the Temple itself. His promise, of a Coming One who was about to appear, spoke of a figure very different from Herod. And as though to rub in the point, he told his followers that Herod's aspirations were out of line. Would God's anointed really behave in such a fashion? A Messiah marrying his brother's wife?

No wonder Herod—and particularly Herodias, the woman at the centre of the scandal—were annoyed. Yet Herod had enough Jewish sensibility about him to listen to John again

and again, torn between his anxiety at what John was saying and a strange compulsion to go on listening. But then came the day, with the party, the guests, the wine, the famous dance, the rash promises, and the executioner's grim trip to the dungeon. The kingdoms of the world are indeed to become the kingdom of God, but those who speak of this in advance are likely to suffer the anger of those who feel their power slipping away from them. The casual, accidental nature of the event gives an extra dimension to the tragedy, a belittling of the noble and lonely prophet.

If royalty, sex and religion form such an explosive mixture, we shouldn't be surprised at the chequered history of court intrigue, scandal and disaster that have dogged the steps of the church ever since royalty became interested in Christianity in the fourth century. But there have always been kingdom-prophets to declare God's judgment on human pride and folly, and to suffer the consequences. Mark, in telling this story, is not only looking on to the death of Jesus himself, a political football between the Roman governor, the Jewish high priest, and the expectations of the fickle crowd. He is looking further, to the little communities of Christians he knew, wherever they were, facing persecution and hardship for their determination to stick with the kingdom-message whatever the authorities might do.

We aren't told what John said as the executioner came for him. This isn't a story, like many other Jewish stories of righteous men brutally killed, of a martyr who took the opportunity for a speech affirming his message and warning of God's vengeance. But Mark leaves his readers in no doubt. John was a righteous and holy man, and the kingdom of which he had spoken, and the forgiveness he had offered, were the reality that would win the day. Even in so solemn and ugly a story there can be found real encouragement to faithful witness and constant hope.

Mark for Everyone (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 75–77.

Bibliographical and Contributor Information

Unless otherwise noted, the Introductions to the readings come from *Introducing the Lessons of the Church Year, Third Edition* by Frederick Borsch, and George Woodward. (New York; Harrisburg, PA; Denver: Morehouse Publishing, 2009).

Bible verses are from: *New Revised Standard Version: Updated Edition*. Friendship Press, 2021, unless otherwise noted.

[Book Outlines](#) are from [Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary](#) website maintained by the Anglican Diocese of Montreal.

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Odds & Ends

From the Book of Common Prayer

Prayers (and more) that come to my mind as a response to Psalm 24 and Ephesians 1:3-14 ~Fr. Dan

Q. What is prayer?

A. Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words. (856)

Q. What is corporate worship?

A. In corporate worship, we unite ourselves with others to acknowledge the holiness of God, to hear God's Word, to offer prayer, and to celebrate the sacraments. (857)

Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. (96)

Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. (358)

2. *A Litany of Thanksgiving*

Let us give thanks to God our Father for all his gifts so freely bestowed upon us. For the beauty and wonder of your creation, in earth and sky and sea, *We thank you, Lord.*

For all that is gracious in the lives of men and women, revealing the image of Christ, *We thank you, Lord.* (837)

8. *For the Beauty of the Earth*

We give you thanks, most gracious God, for the beauty of earth and sky and sea; for the richness of mountains, plains, and rivers; for the songs of birds and the loveliness of flowers. We praise you for these good gifts, and pray that we may safeguard them for our posterity. Grant that we may continue to grow in our grateful enjoyment of your abundant creation, to the honor and glory of your Name, now and for ever. Amen. (840)

Collect for Purity

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen. (355)

Confession of Sin

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen. (360)