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Paying Attention

Mark 6:14-29
Ephesians 1:3-14

When we catch up with Jesus in Mark's sixth chapter, we discover that Jesus has been busy. If you hold our spot in Mark 6 and look backwards we find that Jesus has been baptized and tempted in the wilderness, begun his preaching ministry, called disciples, heals a bunch of people at Simon's house, cleanses a leper, heals a paralytic, heals a man with a withered hand, teaches a crowd so big that they threaten to crush him trying to get close, stills a storm on the sea of Galilee with a few words, heals a demon possessed man, healed a woman with a hemorrhage who had been sick for 12 years and then raised a 12 year old girl from the dead, gone home to preach and been rejected by his home town synagogue and sent his 12 disciples out on a mission trip. He has done all of that, and finally – Mark says – Herod -the Galilean ruler appointed by Rome – hears of IT. And even though all of IT has happened, it is not at all clear who this Jesus is. Herod, haunted by a guilty conscience, hears of what Jesus is doing and immediately has a flashback of how he had treated John who had been called the baptizer.

READ MARK

This story is so vivid and so easy to see in our imagination that the story itself lives on in people who don't even know this story, but who will reference it every time they talk about "having someone's head handed to them on a platter." This story has all the elements of a great dramatic movie: insecure despot leaders living in the castle with the backing of a foreign government but trying to look powerful and benevolent. A lavish birthday party – likely involving too much drinking - held against the backdrop of political and moral scandal. A beautiful, sexy dancing girl and a grudge holding wife and a lone prisoner wearing camel's skins who was arrested for criticizing the despot ruler and his "sort of related" wife. This is so real we don't have to make it up! It is hard to tear our eyes off of this salacious and beautiful scene. It is like reality TV Galilee style!

And this story of the death of John the Baptist is paired in the assigned Scripture readings with a passage from a letter, written to an ancient church community in Ephesus. This Ephesian passage can't hold a candle to Mark's story. Paul writes such a dense theological letter, using so many ecclesiastical buzz words that it is easy to think this is a letter from Charlie Brown's teacher from all those old Charlie Brown movies: "Whaa Whaa Whaa Whaa". I guess the modern translation would be, "Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah!" It is really hard to understand what Paul is saying in Ephesians. It requires some careful attention.

READ EPHESIANS

Even though it is not easy to read or to understand, this passage in Ephesians is really close to a good synopsis of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. At the root of the Christian faith is this affirmation that whether we like it or not, believe it or not, agree with it or not, understand it or not, God – who created all that is – rules the universe and has a plan that is redemption and unity and salvation. This plan that God has for the creation will eventually gather up every loose end and dangling thread and reveal a beautiful tapestry that tells the story of God’s glory and God’s love for us and all things. This plan that God has – this sovereign, all powerful, mysterious plan – will outlast and does even now mean more than the things that seem so real and present – all that we touch, taste and see and know will be eclipsed by God’s plan for redemption. And – says Ephesians - whenever we get a glimpse of the power of God’s love it is a tiny taste, or a down payment on the inheritance that we have coming. This powerful affirmation of the sovereignty of God to redeem all that God has made is where Ephesians begins. That is – I believe – what those 14 dense verses in Ephesians are saying.

And if what Ephesians says is true then we have spent a lot of time paying attention to the wrong things. It is so much easier to pay attention to the beautiful dancing girls and lavish birthday parties and gory beheadings that are motivated by political intrigue. They seem so real! And – it is not that they are not real. But it is that those things are not permanent or eternal and do not inform our deepest purpose and meaning in life. But it is so hard to pay attention to the truth of God’s sovereign power and redemption when there are glittery dancing girls and powerful rulers in the room.

Even as we sit here the world news agencies predicted yesterday that close to a billion people across the world are – even right now – paying attention to and watching in some venue – the final World Cup Soccer match between Croatia and France. [And if any of you are streaming the game instead of listening to me – just don’t tell me. First it would be discouraging and I just don’t want to know. And second, I am going to watch the game later and don’t want you to tell me how it ends!!!] – a billion people paying attention.

I could scarcely think of a better contrast. What in this world is real? What lasts? What is more important: spending an hour to watch an international soccer contest or getting dressed to come to church to hear me read from a letter that is 2,000 years old and – if we are not attentive – sounds a little like “blah, blah, blah, blah”?

What is more real? What is more important? A lavish birthday party with lots of free drinks and beautiful dancing girls and the possibility of a public execution, or finding out more about an itinerant preacher from the rural suburbs of Galilee who – it has been reported – heals, raises from the dead and who can forgive sin?

The thing is that both are real. John’s death is real. Just like our suffering and death is real. John really is beheaded on the whim of a drunken political puppet of Rome. Evil is real. Cancer

is real. War, violence, mental illness, addiction, political corruption . . . all of it is real. All of it affects us. All of it attracts our attention and affects our everyday lives in real ways.

But even all of that – the good, the painful, the exciting, the repulsive, the terrifying – all of it is still only a temporary reality. We are a temporary reality. The winner of the World Cup Soccer tournament is a temporary reality. John's life and ministry is a temporary reality. Our own lives and accomplishments and activities are temporary realities. Real – just not lasting or eternal.

But true, eternal reality is this: "God has made known to us the mystery of God's will, . . . that God set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth." (Eph 1:9-10) That reality transcends and trumps who wins the World Cup, Herod's Birthday Party, the Roman Empire and even John's brutal execution. That Gospel reality transcends and trumps the current political wars, the Russia investigation, the drug wars in South America, the worldwide refugee crisis and our own personal suffering and tragedies and our own personal victories and joys. God rules the universe. That will last – no matter what happens to us.

Now – and this may be the most important thing I can say today – the reality of God's sovereignty does NOT mean that we should just sit down and do nothing about evil, or give in to disease or addiction, or stop protesting inhumane treatment of the vulnerable wherever we see it. This Gospel reality means the opposite. The fact that God has a plan to redeem the universe means that if we really want to pay attention to reality, we are to pay attention to all the ways and places where love triumphs and the vulnerable are protected and health and wholeness is cultivated. If we want to get a down payment on this eternal inheritance, then we are to pay attention to the places where God is at work – where the evidence of the Holy Spirit results in conflicts resolved, diseases healed, political leaders held accountable, mentally ill people healed of their distress and where all are called to follow and to serve those who serve God's will and purpose. That is what you and I are to be paying attention to – what is real and eternal and redemptive. Pay attention to those people – to those events – to those healings. Pay attention to where God is at work, and where we can taste the future God has planned.

All the rest – the birthday parties with drunk leaders and dancing girls and public executions of poor prisoners – they will continue to happen. Don't be surprised by that. Instead live in ways that show that you know that the God who created all that is has a plan to reconcile every conflict, feed every hungry person, release every prisoner, forgive every sin and gather up all things into a unified whole -the Kingdom of God. Pay attention to those things.

These Scriptures ask: Where is our attention? What do we think matters? What do we think is real and eternal? Pay attention.