July 12, 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Mark 6:14-29

by Marilyn McEntyre in the July 8, 2015 issue

I like the Gospel of Mark, with its many abrupt, surprising acts that take place "suddenly" and "immediately." It sometimes seems a little breathless—as though the story is still being told, years after the fact, with utter astonishment. And I like Mark's frequent mention of how people felt: the crowds were "amazed." The disciples were "filled with fear." Everyone "marveled." A woman "felt in her body that she was healed," and she approached Jesus "with fear and trembling." The book ends (at least in one version) with just such an aside about the feelings of the women at Jesus' empty tomb: "trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

In this week's text, Herod's conflicted feelings about John the Baptist provide a curious footnote to a dark story of jealousy, seduction, and murder. Mark says Herod is "greatly perplexed." The tetrarch is afraid of the prophet, intrigued by him, puzzled, and threatened—but disinclined to hurt him. It is not an unusual predicament. King Lear might have felt this way about his candid fool; Captain Ahab about his sober first mate, Starbuck; Henry VIII about his friend Thomas More, who set a standard of conscience the king couldn't meet; George Wallace about Martin Luther King, whose prophetic voice trumped the power of the governor's office. Prophets and political leaders have generally been at uneasy odds, often bound in intimate enmity that leaves the latter greatly perplexed.

It is easy to see how prophets threaten established power, especially where power is being abused. What is not so obvious is how the prophet's greatest success may lie in the perplexity of the powerful—how the prophet's job is not only to speak truth but also to bemuse. The root meaning of *perplexity* is "completely entangled." When perplexed we find ourselves wound up in the strands of a problem, unable quite to distance ourselves or to retreat into indifference. Herod seems to harbor this kind of fascination for the wild man who wandered his territory eating locusts and honey and preaching some sort of sedition. The most poignant note in the record of Herod's tragic self-betrayal is the simple observation, "yet he liked to listen to him."

I generally think of the prophetic word as one of warning—sharp, dire, perhaps laced with outrage on God's behalf—or as one of promise for the faithful. John preaches both repentance and the coming of the kingdom, both warning and promise. Because this message has become so familiar to us, it is easy to forget the element of puzzlement Mark mentions. John doesn't just offer a convicting reminder of what the Jewish people are called to. He also presents a mysterious, intriguing, compelling presence, his very clothing a challenge to decency and good order, his humility bold and unapologetic. John's willingness to dwell at the margins, to live on little and to risk arrest and death, fascinates the very man whose power he challenges.

When I hear a prophetic word, I recognize it by its evidence, conviction, and scriptural roots—and by the way it summons me to change. It is a word that breaks through denial, challenges norms, and seeks to awaken. It is characterized by courage.

I think about people I have liked to listen to even though their message disturbed my peace of mind—Bill McKibben on climate change, Amy Goodman on corporate corruption, Jeremy Scahill on "dirty wars," Edward Snowden on NSA spying, Eric Schlosser on the fast food industry, Chris Hedges on U.S. wars. They are truth tellers and whistleblowers who challenge privilege, who direct a critical gaze at abuses of power and culpable ignorance, who spell out consequences most of us are loath to face. They are also good stylists who know enough rhetorical strategies and stories to engage even those who would rather avoid what they have to say. Their messages are bold and candid; they pull no punches. But their methods have been honed patiently and conscientiously, fact-checked and fine-tuned. They have made themselves accountable.

And they are imaginative. Walter Brueggemann insists that "it is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination." He also lists among the prophet's tasks "to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture."

Imagining alternatives to "normal" means baffling those for whom normal is normative. It is hard to question established conventions and institutional practices. It takes a person of wide-angled vision, an unusual turn of mind, and the courage to confront. And confrontation generally doesn't succeed by itself. It is best partnered with prayer, wit, and good wordsmithing.

I like the idea that the Spirit comes in through the back door: that healthy spirituality is subversive because it hews to a plumb line in a culture of crooked walls. The one who stands straight among those walls will seem disturbingly out of line. As Flannery O'Connor put it, "You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you odd." The courage to be odd and interesting seems to belong to the prophetic calling—both to those called for a lifetime and those called at particular moments to speak an unpopular truth when no one else is likely to.

Jesus left in his wake a trail of uneasy, intrigued, perplexed hearers scratching their beards or pacing their courtyards. There must have been those among them who knew that if they listened long enough, they would be brought to a point of decision they'd much rather avoid. Hearing would have consequences. But though they were greatly perplexed, they lingered. For reasons they couldn't fathom, they liked to listen to him.