

**PENTECOST:
A TIME TO EXPERIENCE GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT ALIVE AND ACTIVE**

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 10

July 12, 2009

Amos 7:7-15

Psalm 85:8-13

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-29

Death of a Prophet

In this week's Gospel reading, a question about Jesus' identity leads to the story of John's arrest, imprisonment, and execution. This story was retold, with slightly different details, by the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius (died after 100 C.E.), a fact that corroborates the historicity of its outline. Mark's narrative recalls martyrdom stories throughout the Bible: the stoning of Zechariah, son of Jehoiada, in 2 Chronicles 24:20-22, the torturing of Eleazar in 2 Maccabees 6:18-31 and the seven brothers in the following chapter, and the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7:54-69.

The narrative also suggests that John the Baptist acted like Elijah and other Old Testament prophets in defying the king. Similarly, the banquet scene and Herod's foolish promise share their folkloric origin with the story of Esther and King Ahasuerus as told in chapter 5 of the eponymous book. The phrase used by Herod and Ahasuerus "even to the half of my kingdom" is identical in the Greek texts of Mark and Esther. There is also a strong similarity between Herodias' daughter and Judith, who seduced Holophernes in order to behead him.

Out of all these traditional motifs, Mark creates an unforgettable text that conveys in some 20 lines the weakness of Herod, the guile of Herodias, the urgency of her daughter's demand, and the gory details of John's execution. An almost unbearable tension builds up between the comings and goings of 'the girl,' the questions asked and answered, and the presentation of the gory trophy on a platter as a last dish for an unholy feast. No wonder Mark's story inspired countless artists, from Botticelli to Richard Strauss.

No less remarkable than Mark's skill in depicting Herod's banquet is his ability to suggest that John's fate foretells Jesus' passion. This is the only narrative in Mark's Gospel that does not revolve around Jesus and does not even mention Jesus' name. Nevertheless, the events leading to John's death are described in terms similar to those used to recount the passion of Jesus. In both cases, there is a plot to kill the holy man, who is then arrested and bound before being condemned by a reluctant ruler who is

convinced of his innocence. Hence, the death of Jesus is prefigured in the death of his forerunner.

This week's Reflection was prepared by the Dr. Liana Lupas, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Curator of the Library and Scripture Collection.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in the following Service Centers: **World Service Center** – With thanks to God for the privilege of serving the Global Board, the Area Service Centers, and the national Bible Societies, and with prayers that this service enhances Bible ministry worldwide, and with prayers for the Global Senior Management Team as they prepare for the 2010 World Assembly; **Africa Area Service Center** – With thanks to God for the projects executed last year, especially the *Good Samaritan* program running in over 20 countries; and with prayers for the effective coordination of HIV and AIDS work by the office in Nairobi, and with prayers for literacy programs and that, in the midst of war, political unrest, famine and poverty, the national Bible Societies will be able to make God's Word relevant.

Activity Corner: “Spiritual Blessings”

Supplies needed: Bible; writing paper; pens or pencils; drawing paper and crayons for younger children.

Verses 3-14 in the first chapter of Ephesians is a beatitude, or blessing, in which the writer describes God's gracious bestowing of spiritual blessings on us (1:3). In Greek, the language in which the letter was written, this passage is actually one sentence, constructed as a series of clauses, that encapsulates a trinitarian formula or the three-fold activities ascribed to God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Read this passage and identify the verses that describe these activities. Fold a sheet of paper lengthwise into three columns, and across the top of each column write “Creator,” “Redeemer,” and “Sanctifier.” Underneath these three terms you may also wish to write “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit.” Then in each column list the verses that you've identified that match these three categories.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians emphasizes praising God. Discuss why this is emphasized and talk about the ways in which you praise God. Why is this important? What is the plan that is mentioned in this passage? Young children may be encouraged to draw a picture showing how they praise God. Conclude by singing one of your favorite praise songs.