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"Two ways of looking at the world" The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond
(07/14/2024, The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost)

Let us pray, Almighty God made the words of my mouth
and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight.
O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer, in the name of God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.
Where were you on May 25th, 1986? I know some of you were alive.
Some of you were not, and I know that some of you remember this.
Anybody remember this? Okay.
This is the greatest thing that has happened in a publicly organized
way since Woodstock.
Spielberg, of course, was talking about hands across America.
Celebrities by the dozens joined other Americans by the millions
yesterday to raise money for the homeless.
Here is our Coast to Coast report.
Just about every known variety of New York celebrity,
lend a hand to bring the plight of the hungry and homeless to national
attention.
Show business luminaries, as usual, were equipped to show their famous
faces and their moral support.
I think it's a kind of event that symbolically just really inspires
people
and gives them a real sense of purpose and contribution.
People are always ready to help if they can see how.
Standing up to be counted also were high church dignitaries
and elected officials like Mayor Ed Koch and Governor Mario Cuomo.
Their presence underscored the day's message.
When ordinary people start the band wagon rolling,
the Washington politicians better get on board.
I'm just going to let your reaction sort of settle for a second.
Sam Waterson, by the way, noted Episcopalian.
You just had to throw that in there.
So this event was called Hands Across America.
It occurred on May 25, 1986.
A year after many celebrities had also gathered to sing, we are the
world.
And the purpose of this event was to raise money as you heard in the
news clip for the hungry and homeless.
It was also a social and a cultural event.
I don't personally remember a lot of the details.

I was eight, but I do remember holding hands and releasing balloons in my elementary school's courtyard.

As Wikipedia puts it, Hands Across America was among the last of a series

of widely publicized celebrity-sponsored charity events in the 1980s. Following band-aids, do they know it's Christmas?

USA for Africa's, we are the world.

Live Aid, Farm Aid, and Comic Relief USA.

And so there was compassion fatigue for a couple of years after this period.

And it is easy, I think, to laugh at the sincerity and earnestness of those years.

Now, they do represent a certain hopeful possibility, a time of general optimism in American life

that working together we just might be able to solve some of the world's most pressing problems.

I can't imagine a event like Hands Across America in 2024.

Though by objective measures, the economy is in pretty good shape.

Most people actually don't feel that way when they're pulled, specifically on whether they are satisfied

and content with their wages and their cost of living.

And we might call this a crisis of hope, and it runs deep.

And of course, I wrote this sermon before the events of last night as well.

Gen Z defined as those who were born anywhere from the late 90s to the early 2010s

are suffering from the worst mental health of any generation previous.

A recent poll asked, all ages, do you feel confidence or not that life for our children's generation will be better than it has been for us?

78% responded, not confident.

This time magazine put it recently, Americans are losing hope that their own choices and actions can meaningfully and positively shape their communities' futures.

A crisis of hope means precisely this, that people don't see a future that they can believe in.

A future that is swayed in any way by either the individual action or the collective actions that we might take together.

And so I'll say this, while this particular crisis feels really close to us,

and so new to us, it is not really anything terribly new in human history.

This latest crisis of hope is an example of a tragic outlook, the kind of outlook that literally gave birth to the art form of drama as we know it.

Generally speaking, there have been two ways of looking at the world, described in drama for thousands of years as tragedy and comedy.

Tragedy and comedy don't just have to do with how the story ends, as sometimes we learn in school, sad ending tragedy, happy ending comedy.

That's just part of the story.

The real story is that tragedy describes a way of looking at the world that suggests that there is no way out.

Human freedom and choices don't matter, inevitably whatever we do, we are doomed to be defeated by fate.

These larger forces of malevolence at work in the world, or by sheer dumb luck.

Whatever this power or lack of power is, the point is that there is really nothing to be done.

Life is hurtling, headlong, toward and abyss.

Often in fact, tragedy suggests that our choices themselves seem to be twisted and driven toward tragic ends.

Think of Romeo and Juliet.

Each thinks that the other might be alive, and then when they find out they're not,

they end up taking their own lives.

The characters almost escape their tragic fate, but in running away from it, they only bring the tragedy even closer.

Our Gospel reading today is a gruesome and fascinating story.

I had a good time watching your faces as Alberto Reddits.

This telling of the death of Jesus' cousin and forerunner John the baptizer.

It's a rare story from the Gospels in which Jesus does not appear, in which even only his name appears in passing.

It's also a flashback.

Beginning with King Herod's fear that Jesus was actually John the Baptist having been raised from the dead,

yet this story tells us a great deal about a way of looking at the world,

a way of being in the world that is tragic.

Before I go on, I'm going to spoil the ending of this sermon.

A tragic outlook is fundamentally opposed to the Gospel of good news that we proclaim in Jesus Christ.

Though tragedies do happen in our lives and though the world is still full of so much pain and suffering,

our story, our way of being, our confession is that life is a comedy.

We'll come back to that though.

So rather than Gospel though, rather than good news, rather than the comedy of our redemption,

this is a story of bad news.

A story of what it feels like to be trapped rather than liberated.

To be so thoroughly caught in a fallen and tragic way of thinking that there is no way out.

The story begins with fear.

The King Herod referred to here as Herod the tetrarcher, Herod Antipas.

And by the way, Jesus calls a fox in the Gospel of Luke.

Not because he thought he was attractive, but because he thought he was manipulative.

Let's go and tell that old fox, right?

The son of Herod, the great.
That was the Herod who was the King at Jesus' birth.
There's lots of Herods, it's a big family.
So his dad, in other words, was the King at Jesus' birth,
who was so terrified of the infant Jesus being a king of the Jews
that he called for the slaughtering of all male infants to and under.
Here at Antipas, his son is afraid that John the baptizer has been
raised from the dead.
This is a person that he had killed in the story that were about to
flash back to.
And he is fearful because in his tragic way of thinking,
John would come looking for him seeking revenge.
That is the way of the world.
That is what he expects.
And then we get the backstory.
Even when John, the baptizer was alive, Herod feared him.
Knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, this fear is something
like awe or reverence.
Herod revered John.
We might say he looked up to him.
He had a proper holy awe in the presence of this person who was so
incredibly unafraid to tell him the truth.
He was fascinated by someone so completely committed to God.
Someone who did not compromise, someone who never bent the rules,
someone in other words very unlike a king.
He, by virtue of his office, had to compromise, had to bend, had to
have secrets.
And so because of this, Herod Antipas was also perplexed the text
tells us by John.
He didn't know what to do with this man, with this level of honesty.
This phrase greatly perplexed means that he was at a loss.
He was adrift, as though he had been presented with the decision, but
didn't know what to do.
He had no moral compass, no guiding light.
And so finally after he had followed through with the consequences of
his rash decision,
he was intensely sad.
He had incredible regret for what he had done.
Herod and his wife Herodius are tangled together in this decision.
They are both motivated by this tragic mindset that is ultimately a
product of fear.
Herod is afraid of John's devotion to God, his uncompromising ability
to tell the truth,
even in the face of Herod's power to kill him,
and Herodius seeks revenge for her personal slight.
In both cases, there is a kind of zero-sum thinking.
There are winners and there are losers.
There are scarce resources in the world, and life is a tragic
competition.
The only way to get by is to steal, cheat, and react violently against

anyone who gets in your way.

And maybe, just maybe you can squeeze some fleeting happiness out of life in the midst of its tragedy.

Nothing could be farther from the way of thinking in the gospel, as summarized in our passage from Ephesians today, however.

The gospel begins and ends with hope, not fear.

The gospel reveals the great mystery of our faith that we are not at a loss.

We are not set adrift. We are not alone.

And that if and when we falter, we are not going to lose.

We are going to win through the redemption and the restoration of Christ.

The gospel destroys this tragic mentality that scarcity and suspicion rule human existence

because it shows us a God with infinite resources, infinite wealth, infinite grace, love, and mercy which is poured out on all.

In Christ we have obtained an inheritance, not the type that Herod Antipas received,

an earthly kingdom doomed one day to fail, temporary power that is loosely held and guaranteed only by violence and coercion.

In Christ we, each one of us, have obtained an inheritance that does not rely on competition, that does not rely on merit, that does not rely on talent, that does not rely on anything we can contribute, in fact.

But something that is given to all, an infinite measure, something of which there is always enough.

The gospel shows us that the world has not been left without hope in utter chaos and damnation,

but in the fullness of time God will gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven, and things on earth,

that the world is not a tragedy after all, but a comedy.

In the classical definition of comedy, which by the way the TV show Frazier does perfectly, like two at T,

it is not so much that things are funny, though sometimes that might be the case.

Comedy is the opposite of tragedy, whereas in tragedy events seem plotted by a malevolent force bent on our destruction,

then every decision we make no matter how good our intention will only hasten us toward our tragic destiny.

In comedy the opposite is true.

Even when we stumble and fall, when there is a mistake in identity, when confusion rains,

when no one seems to really know who is who and what is what and what's really happening,

comedy hastens toward a happy reunion, a cheerful unmasking or a light-hearted wedding,

some sign that all of these events are working toward a revelation of joy, of hope, of light, of life.

That's why the old poem that Dante wrote in the 14th century calls it an Italian Comedia, simply comedy.

It's a comedy because that character of the poem, who is strayed from the straight path in life, who travels through the pits of hell and despair, who sees the absolute worst that humanity has on offer, who watches his fellow humans cheat and steal and betray one another, is a short victory from the very beginning of the story, from the first page.

Because God is gathering up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth,

because God in Christ has given us hope so that we might live for the praise of God's glory.

Because we have been marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, the pledge of our redemption,

a promise that no matter how difficult life gets, no matter how fearful and vengeful our fellow humans are, and ourselves might be, God and Christ will never leave us or forsake us.

Because God's story, God's good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ is a comedy.

Because though a future shaped by human choices may not be a future that we can hope for or believe in,

God's future is a future we can believe in.

God's future is not a zero-sum game filled with fear and suspicion and rash decisions and regrets.

God's future is not a world of scarcity and competition.

God's future is good news.

God's future is a comedy.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, we thank you that you have given us good news and that from the first page of each of our lives, you have set us on a path toward joy, toward hope, toward restoration and reunion.

We pray that you would make that real in each one of our lives today.
Amen.