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## “Kobayashi Maru”

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As Christians, especially as Evangelical Lutherans, we say we preach the “good news”. But where is the “good news” in today’s readings (other than the psalm)?

From the farmer-turned-prophet Amos, we hear how he was told to vacate the premises after he spoke truth to those who did not want to hear it. And from the writer of Mark, we get Herod’s flash-back to the beheading of the John the Baptist (after John spoke a truth that Herodias did not want to hear). Those stories sound like “cost of discipleship” messages rather than “good news” (don’t ‘cha think?)

As I prepared today’s homily, I wondered if I had “missed something” about the readings, so I consulted with a few colleagues but they were all were facing the same quandary. Then I consulted with some commentaries (essays about the readings written by biblical scholars) and alas one commentator even came right out and said, “Maybe there is no good news this week”.

The next thought that came to my mind was: “Kobayashi Maru”. Trust me, that is not swearing in Greek or some other language (at least, not that I am aware of) although, for a fleeting moment, I certainly wanted a “word or two” with Pastor John for giving me this particular preaching date!

“Kobayashi Maru” is a nerdy way of calling something a “no-win scenario” and, if you are “into” science fiction at all, you might recognize it as a Star Trek reference. You see, every command-eligible cadet at Star Fleet Academy must take a certain training exercise in a simulator of the bridge of a starship (like the Enterprise) which part of our Sanctuary bears some resemblance to, by the way.

The basic scenario is this:

While on a routine mission, your ship receives a distress call from a civilian freighter named the Kobayashi Maru (surprise!); they have suffered heavy damage, their life support systems are failing, and they have somehow ended up in enemy territory.

So, your options are:

(A) Protect your vessel and its crew by keeping away (abandoning the Kobayashi Maru's crew to certain death) or (B) risk a rescue operation in enemy territory.

If you choose to launch a rescue, you soon discover that the simulator has been "rigged" -the programmers have thought of every possibility. No matter what you do, something goes horribly wrong. Your ship is destroyed and your crew is killed. The exercise, it turns out, is not a game to be won but rather, a test of a person's character in a "no-win" situation

Between the Old Testament and Gospel readings today it appears we have at least three such situations. First, consider Amos. He was from Judah (the southern kingdom of the Hebrew people), an ordinary farmer (a "herdsman and dresser of sycamore"), but. God chose him to be prophet in Israel (the northern kingdom). His options were to obey the northern king's henchman, and go home, or obey God, proclaiming a prophesy that angered the king.

Second, consider John the Baptist. We know, from earlier accounts of him in the Bible, that John also was a strange choice for a prophet (he wore animal fur, ate bugs, and liked to play in the river) and yet he began to prophesy even before he was born (leaping, still in Elisabeth's womb, when he recognized Jesus).

We know from this reading, at the end of his life, that John's options were to show obedience to King Herod, conveniently overlooking the immoral behavior of the king, or to show obedience to God, calling-out the king. as part of continuing to urge everyone to repent of their sins.

The third person who faced a "Kobayashi Maru" in our readings was Herod himself; his options were to keep John in protective custody, despite the aggravation that caused his wife, or to keep the promise he subsequently made to her daughter, despite John not being guilty of a "death penalty" offense. Although Herod ultimately made a poor choice (valuing his personal honor over the life of an honorable man), there is a glimmer of hope in the Gospel reading. Herod, it appears, was starting to "get" John's message!!!

Mark, Chapter 6, Verse 20, says (in part) Herod recognized John as "a righteous and holy man" and Herod "protected him" while he was under arrest. In fact, I would speculate John was safer in Herod's custody (making it harder for Herodias to have him murdered). Furthermore, later in Verse 20, it is clear Herod was paying attention to John. "When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him." And later, after it was clear John "had" to die, Verse 26 says, "The king was deeply grieved."

Reading those words makes me think maybe John's death helped win Herod's soul, because it sure sounds like Herod repented. And this repentance is a sign of hope, my friends, for us, in this day and age because if a crooked politician can "get it" despite grave mistakes maybe the rest of us poor sinners can, too!

I want to bring closure to this homily by way of returning to the Star Trek reference. Did I tell you that one person actually did "win" - was able to save their ship and the Kobayashi Maru? Yea, James Tiberius Kirk, eventually known as Captain Kirk was even awarded a commendation for "original thinking". You see, Kirk "hacked" the simulator, reprogramming it, so that rescue of the Kobayashi Maru was possible. Later in his life, someone challenged Kirk, saying he never really faced a no-win scenario; in response, Kirk replied he did not believe in a no-win scenario.

Thanks be to God, we can make the same claim. We do not believe in a no-win scenario!

Taking us out of the realm of science-fiction, and bringing us back to Biblical terms, are two stanzas from the poem "It Is A Prophet" written by Reverend Kenn Storck, a Lutheran pastor who (like John Hillmer) graduated from Seminex and is advocate of both Stephen Ministry and diakonia training.

Is there no one  
to proclaim justice?  
No voice from the desert  
exposing vices?  
Are ears deaf  
to the king's devices?

Kill the Prophet,  
but never the message.

Another gives voice  
and will persuade /  
a faithful few  
will not be assuaged.

The "win" is in the words "Kill the Prophet, but never the message. Another gives voice...." God has sent us, time after time, prophet after prophet to give voice to the message of God's endless mercy and reckless love delivered in warnings and admonishments and visions of glory! God still gives voice to that message whenever we "bring life" to Scripture by reading, teaching, singing and (yes) preaching about God's gift of grace and our redemption given to us (ultimately) by God's own self as Jesus. And God also gives voice to that message through our very our lives as we provide to others, and receive from others, words and actions as inspired by the Holy Spirit

Even when we are in a desert place, even when we walk through the wilderness, even when we feel the darkness close in on us, even when we are on a road marked with suffering and can only see pain ahead of us, we are assured of the "win" because we know the ultimate message and that the voice of God is there, somewhere!

That, my friends, is most certainly the "good news"