

**A Day of New Beginnings**  
**Mark 6:14-29**  
**A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**July 11, 2021**

Let me start by saying thank you to the many of you who have dropped by the church office to say hello. It has been a truly lovely way to get to know Woodbury UMC. I'm not all that great with names, and since many of you have been introducing yourselves to me one at a time, you might think I'm great with names.

I am eager to get to know more about all of you, including those of you worshipping with us from home. I'm guessing at least a few of you are curious about me, wondering what this new pastor is all about. Which box do I fit in? Is it a good fit, or a little loose around the edges? We'll get there. Being a pastor means being a preacher too, and so I hope we get to know each other through worshipping together most of all.

So what to preach about?

A good sermon is not a generic sermon. It is specific to time and place, and so a good message ought to reflect the realities of pastoring in Woodbury, which are still new to me, but more importantly, it should consider the state of thing at the Woodbury United Methodist Church. We have a Bible reading today from Mark. There is a lot going on in the Gospel this week. Violent and powerful as Herod is, we catch him brooding about past regrets, forced to act against his will by his wife.

And there's a dance here, utterly unholy, with a gruesome ending to the story. What's the sermon I should give you? Stick close to Jesus, Lose your head? Look at the state of things as they are today. Racism and white supremacy, drastic income inequality, health care outcomes, climate change, an impending denominational split, there is no shortage of justice oriented kingdom building topics to consider.

So where am I going with this, my first sermon for you?

I've known this day was coming for several months now, and with all of that in mind, with a little prayer and reflection, the path became clear to me. I want to talk with you about James Bond. It may take a moment to establish the connection, so while it is obvious to me, please bear with me a moment if it isn't obvious to you. (I will say that it is not because in order to pastor, I need to have a license.)

Just about everyone loves James Bond movies. Filled with action, good looking people, romance, amusing innuendo, spectacular locations, witty quips – these films have it all. You watch the next one, and the one after that, and you really look forward to seeing what James Bond is up to in his latest adventure.

And then the studio recasts the character, and like it or not, you get a new actor playing James Bond. People get mad. People get REALLY mad. That was their guy! No one is going to be as good as their favorite Bond. In fact, I hate the new guy just on the principle of the thing.

But then, you see what the new guy can do, and after a while, you have to admit, he's not that bad. So you give him a try—you still miss the old guy, but you have to admit that this new one is growing on you, and after a while you might consider him to be your Bond, maybe even your favorite Bond.

And then, the actor leaves, and is recast once again! There's going to be a new Bond. You don't like it – but the new guy does a good job with the role. Not only that, but after a while, you start to think back to the old one, and you realize, wow, some of those first Bond films were really racist! You may recognize that some of those old films were really sexist. You still like those movies, of course – but you consider that it is probably for the best that they made a change going forward. There is a new James Bond movie coming out later this year – just imagine if they still had the same guy playing Bond that they had 30, 40, 50 years ago—it would be embarrassing, the jokes would be out of date, and the gadgets from the 70s would seem awfully silly.

It makes you appreciate how each of these Bonds have built on the foundation of those that came before them, and took it in directions that were beyond anything that they would have done or even been capable of doing previously. Some of the very best Bond films were made decades after the series began, and simply would not have been possible if the filmmakers had just kept on going as they always had. And what a shame it would have been to miss out on so much great stuff. Skyfall might be my favorite of the James Bond films — it's certainly up there — which makes Daniel Craig maybe my favorite Bond. Yet when Sean Connery left, a lot of people thought that was the end of it, that no one could do a better job.

What else? The scripture this week is essentially a long flashback. Herod hears about the things Jesus is doing, and that some are saying the John the Baptizer is back from the dead — a new John, having been recast in the role? — or that Elijah is back from the dead — that's going way back! What's more, you may not realize that Herod is not Herod. That is, you remember Herod from the birth of Jesus, Herod who was so determined to eliminate any competition that he had all the infant boys killed? This guy is the next generation, having ascended to the throne. It's all characters with familiar names, but with different people recast into the parts.

The story is undeniably a tragedy. King Herod doesn't want to kill John, but his wife corners him into it, and John is dead by the end, killed on what seems a whim but is really the result of Herod's wife trying to protect her own interests by arranging the death of the one who threatened her proximity to power. What's the point? We are reminded that Speaking truth to power does not end well for most prophets; that the powers of this world that be would rather kill the innocent than be embarrassed.

Of course, this line of thought starts with Herod hearing news of Jesus, and we as readers are to infer a connection between the great deeds and teachings of Jesus, and the fact that for prophets — let's say they don't usually end their careers in a peaceful retirement.

It is quite a story, but for our purposes here today, the most important part comes right at the beginning, straight from Herod. Who is this Jesus anyway? If not John resurrected — if not Elijah resurrected — then who? Just the fact of asking those questions puts him right up there with the greatest of the great. Could he be as great as they were?

We are in Mark's Gospel, marked by urgency. The core of the entire gospel comes in Mark 8, where Jesus asks "Who do you say that I am?" If you hearing these words think Jesus might be the messiah, **then there is no greater question.** We are a few chapters before that today, but that question looms large. Who is Jesus?

There is another question implied by the author that is just as urgent — so what? Or stated more elegantly, what does Jesus mean for us? If he is the messiah, if he is God incarnate, that demands a response. What response ought that be?

Who does the Woodbury United Methodist Church think Jesus is? I intend that question as a lot less rhetorical than you might think. The identity of Jesus is the question on which everything else hinges. If a wise teacher, then we come to Jesus to learn, to read and study his teachings. If the Messiah, then a bigger response is demanded. If Jesus is the one to reconcile all of creation to God the Father, such that even our sins have been forgiven, then the responses are even bigger, responses that will encompass as much of our lives as we care to give it.

You are curious about me, so here is something about me — I believe firmly that church is the place where we all can figure it out together. Figure it ALL out together. Church is the place where we love each other enough that we aren't forced to all have the same answer. Some of us are lifelong dedicated Christians, some of us came because we heard that there may be cake. To me, church must be thoroughly welcoming to both.

We can learn from one another, and we can study together, and we can experience life together, and from that we can get to know God better. What response to Jesus do you have? I believe that church is a place where we can figure that out, too. As for me, I'm pretty sure it has something to do with love in action, love as more than flowery language. That we take care of one another.

Who is my neighbor? What is my duty to my neighbor? For that matter, if I love my neighbor, then my answer is not so much about carefully measured duty and goes beyond all division.

Theologian David Lose offers this commentary:

"This brings us, I think, to the very heart of the gospel promise. We believe, teach, and confess that Jesus came to make possible for us more than mere survival, more than mere persistence, more even than mere success. Jesus came to help us to imagine that there is more to this life than we can perceive. Jesus came to offer us not just more life, but abundant life. Jesus came so that there could be a better ending to our stories and the story of the world than we can imagine or construct on our own.

And when the Temple has just been destroyed, or your marriage is ending, or you've lost your job, or you fear your child will never speak to you again, or you're pretty sure your friend has betrayed you, or you think you may just have screwed up the one relationship that meant something to you...then the possibility of another ending -- a good ending -- is, indeed, not just good news, but the best news you can imagine.”

No matter what has happened in our lives, we are promised that something else is coming. No matter what has come to an end, we are promised a new beginning.

It is also a sermon about James Bond. The 25th Bond film is due out later this year, after a year and a half of delays. It is the last Bond film to star Daniel Craig, much beloved after serving in this role for eight years but now is moving on. (That part isn't even remotely true, but it would have been **so great** for the metaphor.) From what we know about the plot, Bond has retired, leaving active service, and the designation 007 has been passed on to a new agent — but he is drawn back in. Given all that we have seen over the decades, I will say that my intent is to have better personal and professional boundaries than James Bond.

Woodbury UMC, I am excited that our paths have now crossed and for a little while will intertwine. I arrive at a time when there is a lot going on in the world, and much to consider in the life of the congregation. I look forward to our exploring all of it together.

Amen.