

Loving and life-giving God, help us in all ways and in all things to find the truth in our own lives and to avoid creating scapegoats upon the lives of others. Amen.

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The goat doesn't get to vote.

Today's lesson from Mark is an odd vignette in his telling of the gospel. We hear that Herod was told about the miracles that Jesus – and even the disciples of Jesus – were doing. Herod's first response seems like a classic non-sequiter. "This person Jesus must be John the Baptist – you remember him – he's the guy whose head I cut off." Wait a minute, we ought to say. We've been reading Mark's story week-by-week, and we haven't heard anything about John the Baptist losing his head!

That's right – we haven't. So Mark proceeds to catch us up on the action.

It's really a very sad tale. For this morning, we aren't going to deal with all the sordid details. Instead, we'll take a look at the goat. The goat that doesn't get to vote. The scapegoat.

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Our need to always find a scapegoat goes back a long, long way. Can you think of the first scapegoat we encounter in the biblical story? It's Eve – it was all her fault. Quickly enough we found another – the next scapegoat was the snake. The devil made me do it.

Beginning with the very first story in the Bible, our history has repeated itself time and time again. Whenever we get in trouble, whenever we fall short of the mark – we always look for someone else upon whom to place the blame. No, no – not me. It's not my fault. He's the one that needs to be punished. Take it out on her – it's all her fault.

Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the serpent. The sons of Jacob blamed their little brother Joseph. When Aaron the brother of Moses made the golden calf as an idol for the Hebrews to worship – he blamed 'the people. We always look for someone else to blame.

This need to assign guilt to another party became so prevalent that it became a part of the ritual worship of the Hebrew people. On the high holy day of Yom Kippur, the High Priest would assign all the sins of the people onto a specific goat. The goat would 'receive' all the sins of the people, and then be banished into the wilderness. Off would go the scapegoat – and off would go all our sins.

I don't suppose that the goat got to vote on the selection.

Well, it's one thing when a religious community develops a liturgy whereby we place all our sins upon a helpless – and presumably innocent – animal. If that type of ritual provides us some relief from the burden of our sins – I suppose that's okay. But the sad fact is – we've moved beyond the need for a goat.

As we have become more and more 'civilized' – our needs have become more and more complex. We aren't satisfied with an animal anymore. In these days, we usually look around for a person, or a group of people, to blame.

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We could probably take this topic and turn it into a dissertation for a doctorate in sociology or philosophy. But I don't want us to get too much into 'our heads' this morning. Our faith has preserved these stories in the Bible for us, in order that we might learn something about God and something about ourselves.

John the Baptist had become an unacceptable plumb line to Herod. Some of you may have used a plumb line before. In its most simple form, it is a metal weight tied to a piece of string. When suspended, so that the string is put taught by the weight, you can determine a straight vertical line. Something that has been very, very useful in the building trades over time.

You can bet that the masons who built this church all had a plumb line in their toolkit. Before the days of Home Depot and laser-guided levels and plumb lines, all you needed was a piece of string, and a rock.

When you built a wall you used a plumb line to make sure that the vertical elevation was "true." If you're going to build a wall, you want it to be 'true.'

In the reading from the Hebrew scripture today, God said that he was standing in the midst of the people of Israel with a plumb line in his hand. Amos was telling the people that God was going to make sure that they were 'true.' It wasn't the walls of Jerusalem that God was worried about. God wasn't going to apply the plumb line to the walls of the Temple. It was the hearts and the souls of the Hebrew people that God was concerned about. The plumb line that God holds is designed to find 'the true' line of our hearts.

And that's the type of plumb line that Herod saw in John the Baptist. John had called Herod out. Herod's life – his character – his morals – his ability to govern – were all compromised. The corrupt and morally compromised family and court found the time-honored method of dealing with their sins. They placed all their sins, all their evil ways, all their cruelty upon the head of John the Baptist, and then they cut it off.

The goat didn't get to vote.

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I believe we've preserved this story about the end of John's life because in all things, John's story is a foreshadowing of the story of Jesus. The ultimate scapegoat.

If John was the plumb line that Herod could not abide – how much more so, was Jesus. His message of God's love for us - and the message that love for God and our neighbor should be our response to God – was just too much for society to bear.

There is a strikingly clear representation of Jesus as the ultimate scapegoat in the story of the Sanhedrin, as they are plotting the arrest and death of Jesus.

*"Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, **everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.**"*

*Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."*

There you go, says Caiaphas. It's really pretty easy. Let's make this guy the scapegoat – and when he's dead – all our troubles will go away.

Jesus as the ultimate scapegoat.

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There are many, many aspects to this story that we could tease out. We could look around the world today and find example after example of one people making another people into a scapegoat.

We could look around our own country today and see the same thing.

We could examine the Episcopal Church today and see the same thing.

But that, I'm afraid would be the easy way out.

The powers and principalities that might be creating new scapegoats right before our eyes. Some of us might feel like we – ourselves – are being made into scapegoats – and without the opportunity to vote on our selection as a goat.

But that's a dangerous place to stop.

I know that for myself, I always need to look 'inside.'

God is holding a plumb line in his hand – for me. Where is my own soul off-kilter? Where has my life no longer 'true?' That's the lesson for me today – and I hope the lesson for you as well.

God is no longer holding a plumb line in his hand. God has *given us* the plumb line in the person of Jesus Christ. We are invited to accept that gift and come to the table loving our neighbor and loving God.