In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you should like a title for this sermon, I call it “Receiving Bad News.” My opening text is the first verse from this morning’s Gospel story. It goes this way:

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. (Matthew 14:13, RSV)

“Now when Jesus heard this...” Heard what? The sad news of the cruel death of John the Baptist. King Herod had executed the man. The King had beheaded John. Such a great man was killed because of the King’s foolish words to a dancing girl.

Onlookers might have witnessed King Herod’s deed and thought to themselves, “What authority this man has! What power!” But I say, what Herod did was a small matter compared to what my Lord did! Why, our Lord Jesus took but five loaves of bread and fed a multitude. He fed five thousand men, along with the all the women and children in that crowd, all from a humble supply of loaves. Herod should watch out! His power to kill an innocent man is a minor matter compared to the power of Jesus to sustain the lives of so many with such meager supplies.

Indeed, King Herod did not know it but what Jesus did in today’s story is itself a humble matter compared to what Jesus did “in the beginning,” for all things were made through him and without him was nothing made that was made, not even Herod. And that man is going to have to face Jesus someday. That man must give an account of himself and of how he treated John the Baptist. There is no escaping it. This minor king - King Herod - one day is going to kneel before the true King of kings and Lord of lords and give answer for what he has done. It is the same for you and me, and that is something for us to think about.

Our text tells the tale of two receptions of bad news. The news of the death of John the Baptist is afoot in the land. First let us see how Jesus responds to this news and then let us notice how the crowds respond.

So first, let us speak of Jesus. Jesus hears the news of the death of his kinsman, John the Baptist, and he withdraws from that place by boat to a
lonely place apart. It is likely that he wanted solitude to pray and to grieve for John. Jesus thought well of John. He once said of the Baptist that of all people born on this old earth none was greater than John (Matthew 11:11). It is easy to believe that Jesus was troubled in soul at the death of John the Baptist. So Jesus tries to withdraw to a lonely place apart.

Imagine an alternative. Before long Jesus himself will be betrayed by Judas. When the guards come to Gethsemane to take Jesus off toward his end, someone tried to defend Jesus. Someone swung a sword and cut off the ear of a servant of the high priest. But Jesus ended that brief conflict. “Then Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword back into its place,’” (Matthew 26:52, RSV). And then he spoke awesome words concerning the angels:

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\text{Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? (Matthew 26:53, RSV)}
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Likewise here: upon hearing the news of the cruel death of John the Baptist, Jesus could have summoned the twelve legions of angels. He could have said to himself, “It is time to bring this human madness to an end. It is time to close down the human enterprise. This human project just is not working.” But instead he withdraws to a lonely place apart. Instead of matching and indeed overwhelming Herod’s violence with his own greater violence, Jesus lets Herod go, and Jesus simply seeks solitude. And when even that is denied him by the press of the crowds, he speaks no harsh word to the people but rather heals everyone in sight and then feeds the multitude. What a peaceful soul! What a good soul our Lord Jesus has.

So, that is one story of the receiving of bad news: Jesus hears the news of the beheading of John the Baptist and he withdraws from that place to a lonely place apart.

But it is the second story of receiving bad news that I want to focus on this morning. This second story is about the people and about what they do when the story becomes known that John the Baptist has died. These good folk set a pattern for us. When they hear bad news, heartbreaking news, they head off for Jesus. They draw nearer to their Good Shepherd. You and I should do the same.

For, you see, it was not just Jesus who honored John the Baptist. So did the people. Multitudes had gone out from Jerusalem to hear the preaching of John the Baptist and to be baptized by him. Indeed, John was such a renowned and honored man that even the learned priests and scribes and elders were flummoxed as to what to say about John. When Jesus question them about John, about the origin of John’s baptism, these leaders of Israel hardly knew what to say.
And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say, Why then believed ye him not? 6But and if we say, Of men; all the people will stone us: for they be persuaded that John was a prophet. (Luke 20:5-6, KJV)

The people’s devotion to John was so strong that they would be tempted to stone those who spoke badly of the man. John the Baptist had found a place in the heart of many people. And how do these people respond when they hear that John has been beheaded? They do not grab for stones, they do not swing swords, but rather they seek Jesus. Let it be so with you and me too.

Many of you know of my love and honor for my dear old teacher theologian Robert W. Jenson. We have been praying for the man here at Immanuel, as we will be praying this morning, because he is in a hospice situation at his home in Princeton. Carol and I have visited him, there at his bedside. We have shared the Holy Communion with him, we have anointed him, but we have not seen him for two months. My own injuries have slowed us down some. I have heard the report that the end seems to be close at hand for this man so dear to Carol and me, to our father-in-the-Lord Robert W. Jenson. A colleague said that the next time he and I meet it will likely be at Jenson’s funeral. And that is a sad thought for me.

But knowing my old teacher as I do, if I were to seek advice from him about how to deal with my sorrow at his approaching death, Jenson would say, “Go, join that multitude that is hastening off to see Jesus. Take your place in that crowd. When you are sad and when you are grieved, seek Jesus. Seek him in the holy sacraments, seek him in the Bible, seek him in the faces and the lives of your brothers and sisters in the church. Draw ever closer to Jesus. He will multiply the Bread for you and for others across the church. He will match your sorrow with the promise of eternal life.”

You dear folks before me in this congregation: life has dealt some heavy blows against you, I bet. Unless you are quite young, you probably have not been spared some true measure of disappointment and sorrow in life. If so, I encourage you to not let your heart grow hard, nor permit yourself to think that there is no hope left for you in the particular matter on your heart. Do not permit yourself to think that your story is done and that there is no help for you in the end. Instead join that multitude streaming out into the desert to be with Jesus. They are not heading into a garden, they are not heading into a land with rich provision. In fact all they have are five loaves and two fish for the whole crowd of them. But with Jesus there, that is enough. They shall be filled, they shall be satisfied, because our good Jesus will see to it.

These days Carol and I are watching a series of mysteries called “The Dr. Blake Mysteries.” They are set in Australia in the 1950s. Dr. Blake is a police surgeon with the talent for solving crimes. A recent episode revolved around
the murder of a priest. This dear old Catholic priest was murdered right in his confessional booth. Made me mad. In the end Dr. Blake helps solve the crime.

As the episode goes along it becomes pretty clear that Dr. Blake is a Catholic but a lapsed Catholic. In the final scene Dr. Blake enters the empty church and he speaks with God. He argues with God. He objects that God is indifferent to the suffering and to the prayers of his children. He points out that no father should ignore the prayers of his children. He says that he cannot do that, and then he turns and walks away, out of the church. In a way, it is an honorable stance. Clearly Dr. Blake is a good and kind man. It is his kindness that seems to lead him to sadly turn his back and walk out of the church.

But as I was watching this dramatic scene, I could not help but notice that as Dr. Blake was speaking with God he was in fact addressing a cross suspended over the altar. And behind the cross was a beautiful stained glass window of Jesus. And I could not help but think to myself that the Jesus Dr. Blake was addressing, does himself know something about disappointment and unanswered prayer -- so that his cup was not spared him. Jesus himself knows about a gathering gloom that finally ended with him breathing his final breath and yielding his life up to his heavenly father. That is, the Jesus that Dr. Blake was addressing knows very well about human struggle. In today’s gospel story he gives an initial answer to that human struggle. He feeds hungry people. It is a foretaste of the feast to come.

And so I appeal to us, do not think the human story is over. Do not think that the labors of Jesus are done. Do not imagine that the wonders he can do will not be done for you and me. They will be done because he loves us. So when we received bad news, let us join that multitude streaming out into the desert place to be near Jesus and to receive from him the very Bread of Life. Indeed, in the conduct of our lives let us give ourselves to him, who gladly gives himself to us, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.