

Sunday Lesson – July 11, 2021

GOSPEL: Mark 6: 14 - 29

The Death of John

Background

“Mark sandwiches the martyrdom story within the mission story for a reason. The disciples’ mission is quite successful and reassures us that God’s work continues unabated even in the face of the martyrdom of a great, Godly servant. Mark’s church needed to hear this, because they were suffering great persecution. We need to hear it too, because we, like God’s people through the ages, are prone to interpret difficult times as a sign that God is either impotent or uncaring.

This story serves another purpose as well. The deaths of John and Jesus warn us that God does not always reward faithful discipleship with an easy life. The prophetic Christian might be beheaded—crucified—thrown to the lions—expelled from college—fired from a job—required to apologize. The truth-teller’s road is narrow and filled with potholes. We should not expect applause for preaching prophetically.” *(Excerpts from sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/new-testament-mark-614-29/)*

Insight

“The story of John the Baptist provided the background for the conviction that Herod was feeling. Herod was under conviction, and he was greatly burdened by his sin. His conviction led to a paranoid view of who Jesus was, focusing on the thought that John had returned from the dead! The story of John the Baptist, however, also provides an important lesson to the disciples who were just beginning to go out and to do the work of Jesus. The lesson was a tough one to swallow. The lesson was a reminder that God sometimes allows those who are faithful to Him to be hurt — and even killed — by those who reject Jesus. At that time, there was no-one, except for Jesus, that was as faithful to



God’s work than John the Baptist; however, even John’s faithful to the work of God didn’t protect Him from the hate and hurtfulness of sinful man. Of course even in death, John won eternally, and even in the face of a temporary victory for Herodias because of John’s death, she and Herod lost.” *(Excerpts from storage.cloversites.com/firstbaptistchurch67/documents/Mark%206%2014-29%20-%20Lesson(6).pdf)*

Gospel Reading

“King Herod heard of all this, for by this time the name of Jesus was on everyone’s lips. He said, “This has to be John the Baptizer come back from the dead—that’s why he’s able to work miracles!” Others said, “No, it’s Elijah.” Others said, “He’s a prophet, just like one of the old-time prophets.” But Herod wouldn’t budge: “It’s John, sure enough. I cut off his head, and now he’s back, alive.” Herod was the one who had ordered the arrest of John, put him in chains, and sent him to prison at the nagging of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife. For John had provoked Herod by naming his relationship with Herodias “adultery.” Herodias, smoldering with hate, wanted to kill him, but didn’t dare because Herod was in awe of John. Convinced that he was a holy man, he gave him special treatment. Whenever he listened to him he was miserable with guilt—and yet he couldn’t stay away. Something in John kept pulling him back. But a portentous day arrived when Herod threw a birthday party, inviting all the brass and bluebloods in Galilee. Herodias’s daughter entered the banquet hall and danced for the guests. She charmed Herod and the guests. The king said to the girl, “Ask me anything. I’ll give you anything you want.” Carried away, he kept on, “I swear, I’ll split my kingdom with you if you say so!” She went back to her mother and said, “What should I ask for?” “Ask for the head of John the Baptizer.” Excited, she ran back to the king and said, “I want the head of John the Baptizer served up on a platter. And I want it now!” That sobered the king up fast. But unwilling to lose face with his

guests, he caved in and let her have her wish. The king sent the executioner off to the prison with orders to bring back John's head. He went, cut off John's head, brought it back on a platter, and presented it to the girl, who gave it to her mother. When John's disciples heard about this, they came and got the body and gave it a decent burial." *The Message*

What It Could Mean?

"Mark wants to throw in sharp relief, I believe, what life is like with Jesus and within the world he imagines and enacts, and what life is like without him, caught in worldly structures of power and insecurity and exploitation.

I'd remind us that parables don't explicitly judge, they contrast. This is what parables, at their best, do – they don't such much accuse as they offer a contrast that surprises you, sometimes even traps you, with a conclusion about yourself and the world that prompts a reconsideration of both your assumptions, values, and actions.

The focus of Mark's story thus far centers on Jesus' determination to free God's people from the forces that rob us of abundant life: possession, disease, isolation, discrimination, even death. Jesus comes and, in compassion for the world's need, respond to all those who ask.

While there are lots of ways one could sum up Mark's take on *life in the world as it is*, I would suggest this: a life devoid of either judgment or mercy and that falls painfully short of God's hopes and intentions for all God's people. Notice that even though Herod is grieved at the prospect of killing John, he never admits guilt or even reluctance, placing his standing among his peers ahead of his sense of justice. The prospect of a life without judgment or guilt may initially seem appealing, until we remember that absent judgment there is also no concern for justice and so power is the only arbiter among various courses of action and, consequently and inevitably, "might makes right."

What we are therefore invited to consider, I believe, is throwing before our people the story of Jesus alongside the story of the world and let the parable do its work. We are, that is, invited to be candid about the world in which we live, contrite regarding our participation in it, and committed to living like Jesus in light of God's promises. All of Jesus' miracles, keep in mind, make a huge difference in the lives of those who experience them, but none of them fundamentally changes the nature or course of the world; only his cross and resurrection do that. And, as those marked by his cross and called to hope through his resurrection, we can face the challenges of our day with equal measures of courage and confidence, not imagining we will be fully "successful," but rather that we will make a significant and salutary difference for those around us even as we await God's final redemption.

So tell the story of Herod this week, truly and fully, because it is our story, the narrative to which we were born. But then also tell the story of Jesus, just as truly and fully, for it is the narrative God offers and to which we have been reborn, inspired by it to love those around us and to strive for both justice and mercy knowing that no gift offered in love is ever lost." (*Excerpts from davidlose.net/2018/07/pentecost-8-b-two-stories-two-truths/*)

Readings for Further Study

- [Matthew 14: 1-12](#) *John the Baptist murdered*
- [Proverbs 1:16/Romans 3:15](#) *Make haste to shed blood*

Thought for the Day

"Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance." ~ *James 1: 2-3*

A Prayer

May the God of strength be with us, holding us in strong and loving hands, May we be the sacrament of God's strength to those whose hands we hold, May the blessing of strength be with us. **Amen.** ~ *Unknown*