

The Voice that Never Grows Silent

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Mark 6: 14-29

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Some decades ago, Hollywood movie studios figured out that if they made a movie that was really successful, a movie that made them rich and sold lots of tickets, they could double their success in a pretty easy way. Rather than having to start from scratch and write a whole new script, they could just take the same actors and the same script and repackage the whole thing with a few bells and whistles and viola, the public would think it was a new movie. And so what was born was the sequel. And the sequel was always supposed to be about what happened after the first movie—what happened sometime in the future. But then, a few years ago, I began hearing about prequels, or movies which had the story of what happened before the original movie. And today, that is just what we have. We have ourselves a prequel.

You see, if you were with us last week, and you heard the story about Jesus' miracle of the loaves, then surely you may remember that this miracle happened because Jesus had just learned that John the Baptist had been beheaded, and in his grief for John, he wanted to go to a solitary place and be alone. But despite his best effort to be alone, thousands of people followed Jesus to this place and as one thing led to another, Jesus fed these thousands of people by multiplying two fish and five loaves of bread. But today we are rewinding to the prequel, we are rewinding to the story of how this news came about that made Jesus want to be alone in the first place, we rewind to the story of how it is that John the Baptist came to be beheaded in the first place.

It all started because Herod, the king of Judea decided to take his brother Philip's wife Herodias to be his own wife, and John the Baptist said that was wrong.

Now you might be saying to yourself “Herod, Herod, yes that name sounds familiar, isn’t that the king we always hear about around Christmas? Isn’t that the king who had all those babies killed just so he could kill the newborn Jesus who he thought was competing for his throne?” Yes, that was his name. But that is not *this* Herod. This is his son, but we soon find out that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.

This Herod doesn’t go around killing innocent babies, but he does decide to have John the Baptist put in prison for telling him that what he did was wrong.

So John is locked up for speaking out against the king, but our story does not end there. For one day, you see, it is Herod Jr’s birthday, and he decides to have a big party. And in his honor at this party there is a great feast with a lot of important guests and a girl has come to dance for Herod and all the guests. The girl is named Salome, not Salami but Salome and we are told that the girl is Herod’s daughter. We are then told that Salome dances for her father and we are also told that Herod was pleased with his daughter’s dancing. And as much as I hate to say this, I doubt this is the kind of dance that a daughter would do for her father in a normal family, and I also doubt that Herod is pleased with Salome’s dance in a way that a normal father would be pleased with his daughter’s dancing. This is all pretty strange. And so pleased is Herod, in fact, that he says to Salome, “Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you, even up to half of my kingdom.”

Well, Salome has no idea what to ask for and so she turns to her mother and says “What should I ask from my father? For he has said ‘Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you?’”

And that is when mom says “Ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” Wow, what a nice family this is. And so, with great reluctance, Herod grants his daughter’s wish. He orders an executioner to go visit John the Baptist in his prison cell, and to take an ax with him, and John the Baptist’s head is delivered to Salome on a platter.

Now, if we can put aside for a moment just how disturbed this family is, if we can put aside for a moment the incest and the pedophilia and the brutality, maybe it wouldn’t hurt to ask ourselves why they would do a thing like this. Why would they put John in prison and even have him killed? You’ve heard the story of John the Baptist, you know, he’s the one whose story we tell every Advent. He was just a preacher. He wouldn’t hurt anybody. But you see, he told Herod that what he was doing in taking his brother’s wife was wrong, and people with a lot of power often don’t like to be told that what they’re doing is wrong. And so they put him in prison and ultimately had him killed. But why? Was it to get revenge? Was it to show him whose boss? A little preacher like you, you don’t mess with a king like me. Maybe that was part of it. Was it to make an example of him and show other people what would happen if they decided to mess with the king? If you’re thinking about messing with the king look what’s going to happen to you. I don’t know, maybe that was part of it to. But I think that ultimately this family wanted to silence John as a messenger, because they must have thought that if they silenced the messenger they could somehow make the message less true. If they silenced the messenger, they could somehow make the message less true.

Don’t people do that all the time? They think that if they just make the message go away, it won’t be true anymore. “I don’t like what this church has to say, I don’t like what that church

has to say, so I just won't go. I don't like what that person has to say to me, I won't be their friend anymore. They're out of my life forever"

Now, sometimes of course, I say these sorts of things. Maybe we all do. If I hear sermons that I don't like or read books I don't like or listen to people I don't like I say I can't allow myself to get worked up over that, I won't listen to that anymore. But don't we sometimes go beyond that? Don't we sometimes say to ourselves that even if something is true, we can somehow make it less true simply by refusing to hear it, simply by refusing to listen to it, simply by turning it off?

Sometimes we act as if not hearing something will make it less true, or that hearing it more loudly and more clearly will make it truer. Sometimes when I see street preachers who stand at some urban intersection with a megaphone in one hand and a bible in the other, I wonder if they think in order to make the gospel true, they need to proclaim it as loudly as possible with as many words as possible without any pause for silence so they could hear what anybody else has to say—as if the sheer volume of the gospel is what makes it true, as if not being able to hear what anyone else has to say for even a moment is what makes it true.

Thank God that the truth of what we proclaim does not have anything to do with what we do. Thank God that in order for the gospel to be true we don't have to proclaim it loudly or with the right words or with the right frequency. And in fact in order for the gospel to be true we don't even have to believe it. How often do we think about that, I wonder? How often do we dwell on that, meditate on that? Now, of course, I am a Christian, and as a Christian, I believe that people are better off for having heard the gospel and that they are better off for believing the gospel, and furthermore, Romans says that people cannot believe if they have not heard. A

world in which no one ever heard or believed the gospel, in my mind, would be a very bad place. But such a world would not be a place where the promises of God were any less true.

When I was a kid before the days of video games I remember I would play cops and robbers outside in the yard with all the kids in my neighborhood and it was usually my job to be the cop for some reason while my brother King and my best friend Jeff were robbers and whenever I would arrest someone and put them in those toy handcuffs, I would always say “You have the right to remain silent.”

I had no idea what that meant, but I said it of course, because that is what the cops always said on shows like *Starsky and Hutch* and *Chips* and other police dramas that were on t.v. when I was that age. And I remember one time asking my father “Why do cops say that? Why do they say ‘You have the right to remain silent’ whenever they arrest someone?” And he explained to me that when the police arrest someone and they question them because they want to know where they were at the time the crime was committed and things like that, saying ‘You have the right to remain silent’ is their way of assuring the person whose been charged with a crime that by law they had a right to sit there and not answer their questions. And so, in a way that I could easily understand, my dad explained to me what the right to remain silent meant.

But did you know, did you know that as God’s people who believe the gospel, we too have a right to remain silent? We have the right to remain silent because the truth of the gospel of God’s steadfast and unconditional love for us, does not depend on the words that we say. Now, obviously what we say is quite important. Every week when I prepare to preach to all of you I work very hard on trying to find the right words to say to communicate the truth of the gospel in my sermon. For anyone who is called by God to preach, working hard on your sermons is

important and if someone doesn't want to work hard on finding the right words to say in their sermons they might want to reconsider what they're being called to do. And that applies not just to those who preach, but to those who do anything with words to proclaim the gospel. In the bible, about half of the New Testament is made up of letters that were written to churches and individuals that are mostly the work of one man, the apostle Paul. And when I was in Seminary, I remember my professor of New Testament, the late Charlie Cousar would say "Don't ever think that Paul's letters were anything like e-mails. Paul didn't just fire off these letters that are now known as Romans and First and Second Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians. To write these letters for Paul was like Michelangelo chiseling David out of marble. He thought long and hard about every single word he wrote." Communicating the gospel with words is very important. No one should doubt that it's very important. But the good news of the gospel does not depend on what we say. We have the right to remain silent. And even if we were silent, everything that we proclaim with words that pierce that silence would still be true. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.