

Title” The death of John the Baptist.

Mark 6:14-29

Ever since the beginning, the prophets of God have lived on a conflict with the ways of the world. Ever since the beginning there has always been tension between faith and politics. Jesus’s answer to the Roman authorities regarding his kingship and kingdom “My kingdom is not of this world.” In today’s gospel from Mark tells of such a conflict in the story of the beheading of John the Baptist. But there is a deeper purpose for this story. There is a deeper message which Mark wishes to convey. You see, the story of “the beheading of John the Baptist” is sandwiched in between Jesus having sent his disciples out on a mission of preaching, teaching and healing, and their return from that mission. There is an extra message which the writer Mark, wished to convey.

So, we begin with Mark 6:14-29 The story begins with reports and rumors of the miraculous works of Jesus and his disciples. John the Baptist has already been executed. In fact, Herod, seems think Jesus was the resurrected John. Herod seems to think Jesus was the resurrected John... and he fears him. Why?... It is here that Herod has a flashback about the death of John. You see, Herod had not treated John very well. In fact, he basically was responsible for killing an innocent man. Herod, his wife Herodias and her daughter Salome... were all instrumental in the death of John. The Herodian royal family, as it turns out, was quite the soap opera.

Just so we know, this particular Herod was not Herod the Great, who we hear about in the Christmas story in the Gospel of Matthew. Herod the Great was the Herod who ordered the slaughter of the innocent children because he heard about the birth of the coming Messiah. No, this Herod was Herod the Great’s son. He is called Herod Antipas. (Herod was kinda like their last name).

So, what started the whole conflict with John? Well, according to the Jewish historian, Josephus, Herod Antipas, while visiting his brother Philip in Rome seduced his brother’s wife, Herodias. Just so you don’t think that Antipas was a heartless monster... Herodias most likely agreed to the seduction. It was probably her hope that aligning herself with Antipas would improve her political influence and fortunes. Subsequently, they then both dumped their spouses, and married each other. Just to complete the cast of characters.... Herodias brings into their marriage a daughter from her previous husband Philip, a daughter named Salome. So, the players in this soap opera. Herod Antipas, King of Jerusalem and adulterer Herodias, Herod’s partner in crime. Salome, daughter of Herodias Now that we’ve clarified that, we can go on with the story.

When John the Baptist learns of the union between Herod and Herodias, he did the right thing as any faithful and holy Jewish prophet would do—he spoke out against the marriage. John told Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” John was referring here of course to two passages from the Torah, both in the book of Leviticus, 18:16 and 20:21 where it is basically regarded their marriage as an act of adultery. Now, it obviously took considerable courage on the part of John to speak as a prophet to one of the highest political authorities of that area. It took courage. But John, typically, does not shrink from such a duty. He is the LORD’s prophet and so he faithfully does what a prophet is called to do—be God’s trustworthy spokesperson. This is the case in every time and place. So, this sets up the tension, the tension between a man of God and the political powers. and the tension between faith in God and faith in the powers of this world.

Having said that I wanted to say a few words on behalf of Herodias and Herod Antipas. They weren’t the self indulgent losers that they sound like. You see, Herod Antipas’ father, Herod the Great was not a great role model. Herod the Great had at least 10 wives... that we know of. He also had around 10 sons... that we know of... most of whom he murdered because he suspected they were after his throne. Of his wives, one was a niece and the other a cousin. Marriage between relatives was not unheard of in Herod the Great’s family. In fact, when it came to royalty, in order to keep power within the family, it was common for kings and queens to marry close relatives. Of his sons, three are of interest to us in our bible story, three brothers Antipas and Philip and Aristobulus, Herodias in fact was the daughter of Aristobulus. She was married off to her uncle Philip for political union. So, when she leaves to live with her other uncle Antipas, at least it kept political power within the family. And so, the soap opera continues...

To some extent, Antipas, Herodias and Philip are simply products of their environment. I’m guessing that they saw nothing wrong with the way they lived their lives. I’m guessing, they accepted that “this is just the way it is.” In fact, this messed up family with its messed up relationships is symbolic. This messed up family represents this world. John the Baptist’s condemnation of the Herodian family, was a condemnation of the ways of this world... ways which, to the people living in it, seemed normal, but to God were an abomination.

Yet even after John speaks his prophetic words of condemnation, Herod does not get mad... he does nothing to retaliate. All St. Mark writes is that it “greatly perplexed” him. In fact, St. Mark says Herod “liked to listen to” John. So, at best he was just unhappy to be the brunt of John’s preaching. On the other hand,

Herodias was not so magnanimous. Herodias DID TAKE OFFENSE AT JOHN'S PROPHETIC WORDS. She took great offense. Mark says she "had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him." You could imagine her fuming in the background.... How dare that John judge us? "This is the way we live." "No one's getting hurt" "You have no right to judge what we do in private." So, Herodias is angry with John... and holds her anger at John, waiting for an opportunity for revenge.

One day, an opportunity arises. Herod throws a birthday party for himself and invites all of the political big-wigs, in an effort to show off and garner a little prestige. As the evening unfolds and everyone was thoroughly wined and dined, the scheming and plotting Herodias makes her move. She sends out HER OWN DAUGHTER, Salome, to dance: to dance before Herod, to dance before the big wigs, and in doing so, St. Marks says... "she pleased Herod and his dinner guests." Now, I'm suspecting the kind of dance she did, was not like doing a ballet or the Irish River dance. No, I'm guessing it was the kind of dance you would see in a nude bar or something. I'm guessing.... With the wine and the erotic dancing arousing him, the king says to her "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom." Now you know such an offer does not come without strings attached... if you know what I mean. Herod wanted something.... I'm thinking - "Dude... This is your grand niece. The grand daughter of your brother." I'm thinking "Clearly this guy has some boundary issues." But Salome... she has been well prepared. She goes off to consult with her mother, Herodias. Her mother, having nursed her grudge against John, now sees her opportunity for revenge against John the Baptist's words against her. She tells Salome "ask for John's head." Herodias, at last, had her revenge. Kill the Baptist. Kill the Baptist.

POOR HEROD! Nah, not poor Herod... he brought it on himself, by desiring something he shouldn't have and by making a FOOLISH PROMISE. But boy did he had a dilemma. WHAT TO DO? If he failed to keep his oath, that would most certainly bring political ruin. Who would trust him if he failed to keep his promises? It would also make him look too much like a Jewish sympathizer. That would endanger Rome's political and military control of Galilee. and endanger Herod's position in the government. But on the other hand.... But on the other hand... if he did carry out his promise, he was murdering an innocent and holy man.

We know of course that he chose the latter and John was executed. And this is the horrible story of John's death. John, of course, loses his life. Herod is saddled

with a guilty conscience for the rest of his life. Herodias succeeded in eroding the level of trust between herself and Herod and perhaps between herself and her daughter too, for using her. We can only imagine what guilt Salome carried knowing that she was responsible for John the Baptist's death. Despite his attempt to maintain his political power, according to the Jewish Historian Josephus, eventually Herod and Herodias lost favor with the authorities in Rome and ended up living and dying in exile in the state of Gaul. So ends a life, lived for political, and if I may say, Earthly power.

So now.... having told the story of John the Baptist's death... there is a second message. St. Mark has purposefully sandwiched it between the story of Jesus' sending of the disciples out into the world to preach the Gospel. The story of John the Baptist is actually a foreshadowing of Jesus's story. Jesus, like John, would be totally innocent of the worldly powers' charges made against him. Jesus, like John would be executed by the worldly "powers" more out of political preservation and expedience than anything else. As Jesus kingdom was set against the kingdoms of this world... so too would the disciples will meet aggression from the powers of this world. So sandwiching the disciples command to preach with the Baptists story, St. Mark emphasized the perils of proclaiming the gospel. Even St. Matthew records that they would witness before kings and princes, but they would be rejected by Gentiles as well as Jews for their witness of Jesus Christ. The world they were called to witness in was an evil and dangerous one. If one witnesses to the truth, it WILL result in persecution. St. Mark's message to us.... Do not be surprised at people rejecting your message. Do not be surprised. Nonetheless, God is still calling you to share the Gospel. Do not worry for He will be with you. This, in fact, is our only purpose for staying in this world. We preach so that yet one more might be saved. **WE PREACH SO THAT YET ONE MORE MIGHT BE SAVED.**

And that is my final point. There are other Herods in this world There are other John the Baptists too. Those who reject Christ and those who received him. But it is important for us to remember... Christ died for all. Christ died for both the Herods of this world AND the John the Baptists. We preach with hope. Our hope is that a present day Herod may one day become a brother in Christ. That is why we preach the Gospel. We share the Gospel so that **YET ONE MORE MIGHT BE SAVED.** May God use you mightily, may the next person you talk to be that "one more." Amen.