

Mark 6:14-29

6:14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him."

6:15 But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."

6:16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

6:17 For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her.

6:18 For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

6:19 And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not,

6:20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.

6:21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.

6:22 When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it."

6:23 And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom."

6:24 She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer."

6:25 Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

6:26 The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.

6:27 Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison,

6:28 brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.

6:29 When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Verse one of Mark's gospel reads, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ." This beginning includes a messenger. Way out in the wilderness, a fiery prophet named John the Baptist preaches a message of repentance, and forgiveness, and ultimately, one of hope. The crowds flock to John. He invites them into baptismal waters. And John tells them, "I am baptizing you with fire, but pretty soon, somebody's coming who's gonna baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John was inviting people to be keenly aware of the word, and the ways, and presence of God. And with such awareness, to turn back toward the enduring love of God. Jesus, the one to follow John, will invite people to experience the love and power of God for themselves.

And you know how the story goes. One day, Jesus, like so many others, finds himself walking that wilderness path, and drawn to baptismal waters, he approaches John. And somehow, somehow, the clouds break open, and the Holy Spirit falls fresh upon Jesus in the most profound way imaginable, and Jesus leaves those waters ready to illumine God's wildest possibilities. And two stories diverge. John exits stage left, and our drama turns its attention to Jesus.

Fast forward to chapter six. Last week, we learned that John's prophecy has come true. Jesus and his disciples have travelled from village to village, preaching and teaching the way of repentance, anointing others for ministry, performing many signs and wonders, and healing those in need. And it's not just Jesus. His disciples find the same success in pairs of two by two.

This week, we learn that Jesus and his disciples are making a name for themselves throughout the region, so much so, that they've garnered the attention of Herod Antipas, Tetrarch, or Ruler of Galilee and Perea.

Herod is the son of Herod the Great, whom you all might remember for his massive construction projects, including the revamped Jerusalem Temple. More likely, you all will also remember Herod as the tyrant bent on infanticide in Matthew's gospel, and from whom Jesus' family flees to safety in Egypt. And how on Epiphany, those wise men and wise women were too wise to trust a suddenly-curious and suddenly-devout king.

Herod Antipas isn't exactly a chip off the old block. At least professionally speaking. He's filler. He's more the like the World's Okayest Herod. And he's the puppet of the Roman Emperor. But don't confuse Junior's incompetence and apathy with kindness or naiveté. He may not have inherited his father's ingenuity, but he did inherit his father's cruelty and distance.

For whatever reason, Herod Antipas is convinced that Jesus is not merely some prophet, but rather, he believes Jesus is the second coming of John the Baptist. And it's at this point in the text that we learn of John's tragic end, and we also steer away, in entirety, from any mention of Jesus and his disciples.

Remember how I said John preached a fiery gospel? Well in John's estimation, just like the prophets of old, it was time for Israel to turn away from the lure of power, and greed, and lust, and turn toward the love of God. It was time to get reacquainted with a covenant of collaboration, and once reacquainted, to live out such a covenant. For John, truth, fidelity, and faith were essential elements in repentance.

Well...it turns out Herod Antipas had eyes for his brother Phillip's wife, Herodias. We don't have the full details, but something is untoward in his pursuit of her, and she him. And the ruler was gonna have what the

ruler wanted, no matter the obstacle. And John, being a sincere prophet, felt obligated to remind the ruler and his bride of their ethical inconsistencies. Herod, for his part, takes the criticism in stride. There's something intriguing to him about a man who speaks truth. Herodias, not so much. She campaigns to have John eliminated – she won't tolerate judgment or bad publicity.

Herod jails John, but it's not your typical jailing. John's jailing is more of a safety measure – Herod keeps him nearby so as not to sacrifice political equity. Think of Westley and the Dread Pirate Roberts in the movie *The Princess Bride*. For three years, Roberts tells Westley, "Good work today. Good night. Sleep well. I'll most likely kill you in the morning."

And so it was, at least for a while. Herod kept a righteous man close by. Somehow both perplexed and curious by the prophet's stinging truths. Truth was not so much a concept that Herod could grasp – maybe he found it such an oddity, he needed to know more. *Really, tell me what is truth? How is someone's brain wired for it, because mine's certainly not.* You know, kind of like all those people who listen to murder podcasts – the subject captures them. They just can't get enough.

Then one day, there was a feast. A birthday feast, actually. But it's hard to tell who gets do the feasting. Is it the host or his guests? You see Herod invites his minions and clients and underlings. For he is intent to demonstrate the grandness of his power and lure each of them into believing he can do all the things that come with great power.

Watch what I can do. Watch what I can make someone else do. What do you reckon this red button does? Check out who's in my contact list. Did you know this pita bread cost ten thousand dollars a loaf? One doesn't

have to try very hard to imagine the foolish talk and actions, the sloppiness, that can emerge from such a gathering.

Add to that, most people around you, even the people you should love the most, I don't know, like say your brother and your daughter, are also expendable. What's somebody's wife? And hey, wouldn't it be fun for my daughter to dance for the guests? Objectification is fine as long as it serves my purposes, right?

So...drunk with power, and patriarchal stupidity, and more than a hint of meanness, Herod promises any gift in the world, even half his kingdom to his daughter. I mean, she has pleased him after all. And since she knows the game, she and her mother play, too. Give us John the Baptist's head on a platter!

But Herod can only play the fool. He can't look weak or indecisive in front of his admirers, and he can't go back on his word. And so the deed is done. John's life ends, not for any profound reason, but simply because the empire ebbs and flows by the tantrums of rulers, and their kin, and their impassioned constituencies.

The text says Herod is grieved, but I struggle to believe it's grief for the loss of John's personhood. I suspect it's more the annoyance of being outsmarted by his own family. Perhaps, too, the loss of his curiosity, the pleasant distraction from his daily fantasies. The one bit of realness in his unreal world.

Nearly every commentary I read this week struggled with what to make of a story like this. It's full of political violence. It's empire at its most grotesque. It doesn't really mention Jesus. And it's certainly hard to find a sliver of hope in it.

The hopeful part isn't Herod, or any political leader of any era for that matter. Even the most subtle empires discard people. And their leaders engage in this process top-down. And honestly, this gospel is written nearly a half-century after the events it describes in an age where Rome and its vassal lords were even more brutal to Jesus-followers than what we read here.

I think it's of note that Mark's author juxtaposes the absolute unrighteousness of this story with the absolute righteousness of last week's story. In little villages all along the coastline, Jesus' disciples have summoned the power of God – lives are being emboldened, and healed, and transformed. But in Jerusalem, the so-called seat of power, they are still being discarded. Mark's author foreshadows the senselessness of the empire's response awaiting Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, not to mention Jesus-followers in the present.

But a lot of these commentaries fail to pick up on that last verse. When John's disciples heard about these events, they went to the palace, and collected his body. I cannot imagine such a task was safe. In any way. Emotionally, there can't be anything worse than seeing the remains of a tortured friend. Physically, the work would have been exhausting. I imagine they would have had to carry John's body without the aid of cart or animal, not to mention prepare a burial site. And it's certainly not safe politically, socially, religiously, or economically to publicly align yourself with Herod's political prisoners.

But John's disciples are determined. They are gonna bring Elizabeth and Zechariah's boy home. They are gonna offer John the dignity in death that Herod refused him in life. John's life matters to his disciples. And they spend the remainder of their lives proclaiming the very Word he gave his own life for each us to hear.

There's more hope, too. The disciples of John join the Jesus movement. And in the next few verses, they take part in a very different kind of feast. With a little encouragement from Jesus, they feed the multitudes, five thousand men, and thousands more women and children. At the end of that story, you'll remember that all the leftover pieces of broken bread and fish are collected, filling a dozen baskets. Isn't it amazing the kind of world we can create when we aren't so focused on whom and what we should discard? Empires like fixing things, and usually by subtraction. The kin-dom of God goes about healing, collecting broken pieces, and helping to make them whole again.

Let me close with a final thought.

It hasn't been a stellar year for empire, and I fear the years ahead won't be much better. We are seeing the most jagged edges and senseless impulses of governments around the world. And yesterday's events in Pennsylvania remind us that violence is too often revered over discourse. And that our own country has much reconciliation to pursue. I pray daily that our love for one another will mend our partisan and polarized nature. I pray that our love for people can once more surpass our love for ideas.

The coming election will be a referendum on the direction of our country. That's our process. And we should all pray that it develops safely, fairly, and with integrity. Voices, not bullets, should guide this institution. And assassination attempts should never be normalized.

But I think it's also important for us to remember that the coming election, and indeed every election, past, present and future, has not, is not, nor will it ever be a referendum on God's presence or God's work in the world. God never called us to form a more perfect union, or create a

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more divine legislature. We did that all on our own. God called, still calls us, to live and love in a messy world.

This year, in every region of the world, new leaders will transition into power. And no matter the prevailing parties, no matter their intent to govern with the highest or lowest standards of integrity, some decisions will be fueled by the same senseless impulses as Herod's feast: policies to deprive health, unjust wars, money grabs, the creation of "other," all to appease manufactured righteousness and truth. All to ensure a fragile status quo. All because speaking truth is too awkward, too hard. Friends, the good news isn't found in the construction of shining cities or near-perfect governments. It's found in the people who demand repentance, turning toward the bright and beautiful love of God. It's found in the people who receive bodies broken, repeatedly, generationally, by the futility and arrogance of empire. It's found, not in feasts identifying discards, but in discards, bound together, made whole, the banquet we call God's feast.

Friends, the good news is John and Jesus and the disciples, living, loving, thriving in a messy world. The even better news? We can be those same disciples!

May it be so, and may it be soon!

Amen.