

Mark 6:14-29 (NET)

The Death of John the Baptist

^{6:14} Now King Herod heard this, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead, and because of this, miraculous powers are at work in him." ^{6:15} Others said, "He is Elijah." Others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets from the past." ^{6:16} But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised!" ^{6:17} For Herod himself had sent men, arrested John, and bound him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. ^{6:18} For John had repeatedly told Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ^{6:19} So Herodias nursed a grudge against him and wanted to kill him. But she could not ^{6:20} because Herod stood in awe of John and protected him, since he knew that John was a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard him, he was thoroughly baffled, and yet he liked to listen to John.

^{6:21} But a suitable day came, when Herod gave a banquet on his birthday for his court officials, military commanders, and leaders of Galilee. ^{6:22} When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you." ^{6:23} He swore to her, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom." ^{6:24} So she went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" Her mother said, "The head of John the baptizer." ^{6:25} Immediately she hurried back to the king and made her request: "I want the head of John the Baptist on a platter immediately." ^{6:26} Although it grieved the king deeply, he did not want to reject her request because of his oath and his guests. ^{6:27} So the king sent an executioner at once to bring John's head, and he went and beheaded John in prison. ^{6:28} He brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. ^{6:29} When John's disciples heard this, they came and took his body and placed it in a tomb.

Almost, Not Quite

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: *Mark 6:14-29*

Being King of Judea was no easy matter. When the Wise Men stopped by Jerusalem on their way to Bethlehem, they met a suspicious and conniving ruler in King Herod the Great. They met a man paranoid in his protection of his crown, paranoid enough to order the slaughter of a whole city's children to make sure he killed an infant that a bunch of astrologers had told him would one day be king.

Welcome to the world of Herod the Great, the world of petty leadership in the Roman Empire. Herod the Great ruled on two principles. The first was unswerving allegiance to Rome. Herod was the perfection of loyalty in a middle-manager. There was not one move, not one decision he ever made without fully informing Rome of exactly what he was thinking and receiving their full support. Herod the Great's other major principle of leadership was, watch your back. Thus, his concern about the Wise Men's report.

For much of his reign Herod the Great's two principles served him well. When others tried to unseat him, his known loyalty to Rome assured the Emperor's support. Herod the Great managed the tempests of his reign with aplomb, for the most part.

But like all kingdoms, his was fragile. You can juggle a hundred balls at once for awhile, but sooner or later the fragile timing and dexterity that hold everything together falter, and what was a show of amazing agility becomes dropped balls rolling hither and yon, out of reach, out of control.

For Herod the Great, the strains came near the end of his reign when family squabbles and intrigues spun out of control, which in turn emboldened the populace to fear him far less than they once did. At all corners, the political house of cards trembled, if it didn't entirely fall. Sons one day expected to inherit the throne, the next they were executed. Finally disease added itself to Herod the Great's woes. It was into this circumstance that the Wise Men wandered. No wonder they found an edgy king.

When Herod the Great died shortly after, his will left a kingdom divided among three heirs. By will none had his power; by temperament none had his ability. One of the three successors was Herod Antipas, the Herod we read of in today's Gospel. Mark refers to him as King Herod, but he was really a regional governor, unlike his father who was a king by Rome's decree.

So here we are in Herod Antipas's court. He's giving a party for the officials and leaders of Galilee. Now, this Herod is an interesting man. He's party to the juggling of demands and intrigue, like his father Herod the Great. He has married his half-brother's wife, Herodias, who also happens to be his niece. In doing so, he has angered his half-brother Phillip, as well as his own father-in-law. So they're both out to get him. Then there was the prophet John the Baptist. John is not known for his subtle political statements, and he has cried out far and wide that Herod's marriage to Herodias is unlawful and immoral, which seems to have especially

infuriated Herodias. In any case, Herod has John arrested and imprisoned.

But then we hear something interesting. Herod, the governor of Galilee, likes to go to the prison and listen to his prisoner. He likes to listen to John the Baptist. He pulls up a stool and listens to what the prophet has to say, even though he doesn't quite understand him. Herod is baffled by John, the text says, but there is something about him that intrigues and attracts the governor.

So here we are at a court party. Behind the scene, in prison lies John the Baptist. Herod is intrigued by John, but his wife Herodias is smoldering at the prophet. At the party, the couple's little daughter, also called Herodias, performs a dance to the delight of the governor and all the guests. Herod and his guests applaud with glee, and the governor promises the little girl whatever she wishes. The child confers with her mother, and the mother says, the head of John the Baptist. Herod is grieved deeply, but a promise is a promise he figures, so whack goes the head of John.

As a sidebar, this story has often been misinterpreted. When I was young, some of my mother's relatives frowned on dancing. When I asked them why, they said, "Well you remember John the Baptist. Herodias's daughter danced for him, and lust built in his heart. In a fit of desire, Herod promised the girl anything she wanted. So, the logic went, dancing led to sexual desire, which cost John his head. Probably not. The best manuscripts we have read that the girl is Herod's daughter, as well as Herodias's. In addition, she is referred to in the Greek as a little girl. So, while the dance cost John his head, it wasn't because Herod was blinded by sex. He was blinded by an equally prevalent and more insidious problem. And that is what we now turn ourselves to. The circumstances and conditions that really led to the death of John.

I imagine Herod, a man more sensitive than his father Herod the Great. Herod the Great had accepted the world of political and familial intrigue and danger as simply the way things are. The world is a dangerous, dog-eat-dog kind of place. It's the view that would later cause the philosopher Hobbes to characterize human life as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." (Leviathan, Chapter 13) There was just one thing to do in such a world. The best you can do is play the game by the rules, do what you can to get ahead, watch your back and seek your own delight. Herod the Great had every evidence that the world worked just so, at least for awhile. And so did his son, Herod Antipas. He sought his own power and pleasure. If it angered his first wife, his father-in-law and his half brother, so be it, so long as he could protect himself.

But for Herod, Herod Antipas, there came a crack in the world view. I imagine Herod going down to the prison in the cover of night. I imagine him pulling up a stool outside the cell of John the Baptist. I imagine him asking John to tell him some more of his stories, some more of his ideas. It is fair to say that Herod was baffled. What John said drew a picture of a world so contrary to the world Herod took for granted that he could hardly make sense of it. And yet, there was something deeply compelling about what John said. There was something about it that Herod just couldn't let go of.

John had come onto the Galilean scene preaching a message of repentance for forgiveness of sins. What that rather obtuse phrasing means was that John came preaching a different way of living. He came preaching that the current way of living was so problematic that it required God's forgiveness. It required changing one's ways and values. And this is why it's so important to understand that Herod's downfall wasn't simply lust. The whole set of values and givens by which Herod lived were the kinds of things that John was calling into

question, was calling for the repentance from. And Herod was captivated.

We don't have the words that Herod and John exchanged. But from what we do know, they would have sounded a lot like this.

^{5:21} "You have heard that it was said to an older generation, '**Do not murder,**' and 'whoever murders will be subjected to judgment.'

^{5:38} "You have heard that it was said, '**An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.**' ^{5:39} But I say to you, do not resist the evildoer. But whoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him as well. ^{5:40} And if someone wants to sue you and to take your tunic, give him your coat also. ^{5:41} And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two. ^{5:42} Give to the one who asks you, and do not reject the one who wants to borrow from you.

^{5:43} "You have heard that it was said, '**Love your neighbor**' and 'hate your enemy.' ^{5:44} But I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you,

^{6:19} "Do not accumulate for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. ^{6:20} But accumulate for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. ^{6:21} For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

We recognize these words as those of the one to whom John pointed and said listen to him. There are other words, too, that would have been similar.

"I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant." (Martin Luther King, Nobel Prize Speech.)

Or, how about this? "And the other thing is, I'm concerned about a better world. I'm concerned about justice; I'm concerned about brotherhood; I'm concerned about truth. And when one is concerned about that, he can never advocate violence. For through violence you may murder a murderer, but you can't murder murder. Through violence you may murder a liar, but you can't establish truth. Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can't murder hate through violence. Darkness cannot put out darkness; only light can do that." (MLK, "Where Do We Go From Here?" 8/16/1967)

You know who said these things, right?

How about these words from Ghandi, as we approach the hundredth anniversary of the freedom for which he worked and died:

"Hatred ever kills, love never dies such is the vast difference between the two. What is obtained by love is retained for all time. What is obtained by hatred proves a burden in reality for it increases hatred."

"Experience convinces me that permanent good can never be the outcome of untruth and violence."

"Power is of two kinds. One is obtained by the fear of punishment and the other by acts of love. Power based on love is a thousand times more effective and permanent than the one derived from fear of punishment."

You get the picture.

So, night after night Herod pulled up the stool and listened to John the Baptist. Was he baffled? Sure, especially at first. But it didn't take long before Herod's discomfort wasn't exactly bafflement, at least if what we mean by that was that he didn't understand John. It's

more likely that Herod began to understand all too well. Indeed, he began to understand not only what John was saying, but also that John was right. But if John were right, realized Herod, then the governor's whole way of doing business wasn't. Intrigue, power plays, governance by threat, warfare, the spoils of privilege, the whole way he related to family, friends and adversaries, the things that give satisfaction and meaning in life, every way that Herod organized his life, the whole way he had viewed and lived in the world, were wrong. They did not work.

So that evening in the court when his daughter danced and his wife forced his hand, Herod was a man deeply grieved. For on the one hand he had come to understand that John was dead right, but Herod on the other hand, looking out over all that had defined him, all he had striven for, all that the world had told him was what you live to acquire and achieve, Herod couldn't pull the trigger on changing his life. So instead, he gave the order to have brought to him on a silver platter the head of the one from whom he knew he had heard the truth, simply because he could not give up the lie.

Like so many of them, the powerful thing about this Gospel story is the juxtaposition of the truth the character can see plainly enough and the lie the character very often chooses instead. They are stories for all time. Spanning the centuries they invite us in every age to rethink our rationale. We need but read the paper this morning to know how right John was and the heavy price humanity pays for its failure to heed his words. But like all transformations, this one begins small, with the changes you and I can make in response to John. What say you? Are you ready? God help us be so. Amen.