

P7B 2021 Mark 6:14-29

I usually like to start with a personal example or relevant story but there's just no way to ease into the beheading of John the Baptist, nor do we need to be desensitized to the horror and violence of the bible. It's not a nice book; anyone who tells you it is hasn't read much of it.

Mark sort of gives us the last part first, so we'll skip that for now and go back to it later. This is the only passage in Mark's gospel where Jesus really isn't the main character; although the story very much pertains to him, John, Herod, Herodias, and their daughter get the starring roles. It's hard to keep track of all the Herods in the bible, but as long as you remember that they're all bad guys, you get the gist of it. This is not the Herod who tried to trick the magi into revealing the location of baby Jesus and instead murdered all the infants in Bethlehem. This is that Herod's son. He married his half-brother's wife...maybe after his brother died, maybe before. She was also his niece and he was also married to someone else. It was complicated. Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, decided to pick a fight with Herod over the soap opera which was his family life and called his marriage illegal. John's interpretation of the law was sound; there were a couple of reasons that Herod shouldn't have married Herodias, not the least of which was that it caused a war with his first wife's father, which Herod lost. And we might assume that John wasn't nice about his critique: remember that the voice crying out, in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord also called the Pharisees a brood of vipers. Not exactly how to win friends and influence people.

Herodias wanted John dead, but Herod both feared him and found him entertaining, so he only imprisoned him. The members of the Herodian dynasty had a bad habit of murdering each other, so you can hardly blame Herodias for wanting to get rid of the guy who questioned the legitimacy of her marriage. It would have given Herod justification to get rid of her if his affections ever cooled; think of Henry the VIII and all his wives and how many of them ended up without heads. Whereas Mark portrays Herod as somewhat sympathetic—foolish and too proud maybe, but not actually malicious—he paints Herodias as much more vindictive, using her daughter to do her dirty work.

Artists love to take license and portray this dance as sensual and seductive, but that's probably only because it makes for better theater. Tradition has associated the dancing daughter with Salome, Herodias' daughter from her first marriage. But none of the gospels identify her by that name, and Mark calls her Herod's daughter, not his step-daughter. So it's not even her almost-grown-up daughter whom Herodias manipulates here; picture a kindergartener showing

off the routine from her first dance recital. It was ridiculous for Herod to offer her as much as half his kingdom, but when he promised her a present, he probably thought that she would ask for a pony or a trip to whatever the first-century Judean equivalent of Disney World was. When Herodias instructs her to ask for John the Baptist's head, it's not only a heinous crime against John, it's horrific abuse to her own daughter.

Herod is "deeply grieved"...but not deeply grieved enough to do the right thing. He prioritizes his honor and status above the moral choice and refuses to go back on his oath, which if he had broken could have been interpreted as a sign of shame and weakness. It's clear, however, that Herod knows that keeping his promise, in this particular situation, was the immoral choice. If we go back to the beginning of the reading, as the people are trying to figure out where Jesus' power is coming from, Herod reveals his guilt and maybe even the fear that he's being haunted: Herod is convinced that Jesus is somehow John raised from the dead. This is not good news for Jesus. In fact, this whole disaster shows us exactly what to expect when, a few chapters later, a betrayed and arrested Jesus is brought before Herod. Herod won't act against Jesus himself, but neither will he stand up for justice and save him.

We may be disgusted by what happened to John and grieved by what happened to Jesus, but we shouldn't be surprised. Speaking truth to power is a dangerous thing; it's human nature to seek power, and once achieved, most people will do whatever is necessary to keep it. It doesn't matter that John was right. It doesn't matter that Jesus was innocent. And their situations are not unique. Human history is full of violent injustice. Our world today is mostly less brutal than a little girl serving a severed head on platter as the final course of a birthday banquet. But if we think that justice is always served and the innocent are always safe, we have clearly not been paying attention.

The word gospel means "good news" but this story certainly doesn't sound like it. Of course what happened to John was not good news. Nor is the good news that humanity has made some progress, that we're generally more enlightened, that these sorts of tragedies are, if not eradicated from every society, at least universally condemned as heinous crimes. No, the good news is that Jesus saw what happened to John and kept right on walking toward the cross. God knew and God knows the utter brokenness of the human condition and keeps pursuing us anyway. God knows that we are faithless, yet remains faithful to us. When there is nothing redeeming about our human behavior, God redeems us. This story is about things being as bad as they possibly can be, but God still not giving up on us. And that is good news.