

Early in the pandemic, when many of us were using the extra alone time not just to read books and watch movies or TV but to *re-read* books and *re-watch* movies and TV series, I learned something interesting: While we might think of re-reading a book or watching re-runs as a waste of time, in fact we derive a psychological benefit from returning to well-known stories. It's reassuring and relaxing to watch a drama play out when we know with absolute certainty that the conflict will be resolved—how very different from our world and our personal lives, where we don't know for certain how the conflicts will be resolved, and we can't skip over the parts we don't like. Just this past week, a couple of friends and I realized that, entirely by coincidence, we were all re-watching the same TV show—a feel-good series where the characters slowly but surely grow beyond their stereotypes into healthier, more authentic members of their community. We appreciate that show because it aspires to a humanity that transcends the baser instincts of greed, envy, and power-hungry, self-centered rivalry that have plagued society at least since bible times.

Mark is not the most artistic of the gospel writers, but he has a firm grasp of the human condition and he knows the power of revisiting a well-known story. The first people to have heard today's gospel would have easily recognized the similarities to the Book of Esther. In that story, King Ahasuerus wants to impress his court by showing off Queen Vashti in only her royal crown, but she refuses and is therefore banished. When Queen Esther takes her place, and the buffoon of a king offers her *anything she wishes, even half of the kingdom*, Esther uses her position to save the Jewish people from genocide. Evil is defeated, righteousness prevails, and Jewish congregations still celebrate Purim by re-telling that beloved story, cheering for the good guys and booing the bad guys. But there is no such happy ending in King Herod's court.

This Herod is not Herod the Great, who ordered the murder of all the children in Bethlehem when he couldn't trick the Magi into revealing the whereabouts of the infant Jesus. This Herod is that Herod's son—not to be confused with two of his brothers who were also named Herod. Herod divorced his first wife and married his sister-in-law Herodias—not to be confused with her daughter who Mark also calls Herodias, although she's known elsewhere as Salome. If this sounds a little like *Days of Our Lives*, you've got the right idea: these royal marriages were politically-motivated consolidations of wealth and power. John the Baptist had publicly criticized Herod for marrying his brother's wife, not because John was a romantic, but because the marriage violated the law. As king, Herod should have been enforcing and modeling the law but instead acted as though his position set him above it; the result was all sorts of violence and strife within his own family and between Judea and the neighboring nations. But instead of repenting or taking responsibility for his actions, Herod—who knows John is righteous and holy, who fears and likes John—still imprisons him to silence the criticism.

If Salome's dance echoes Esther's story, Herod was not a proud parent watching his child's ballet recital but was exploiting the girl for the enjoyment of his courtiers, as generations of artists have portrayed it, though we don't know for certain. Herod is foolish enough to reward Salome by publicly promising her anything. We don't know if she honestly seeks her mother's advice or if she conspires with her. And we don't know if Herodias is simply evil, though that's often the assumption, or if she acted out of fear for her own position—since John kept questioning the legitimacy of her marriage, or even if she felt that both she and her daughter had been victims of Herod's cruelty and saw a way to get revenge and regain agency. Whatever the motivation, she seizes the opportunity and tells her daughter to request the head of John the Baptist. Salome adds that the head be served on a platter. And Herod, who Mark says is deeply grieved, who knows very well that what he is doing is morally wrong, and who, as king, absolutely has the power to do nearly whatever he wants, still prioritizes his own reputation, and so as not to look weak in front of his guests by breaking his oath, he orders John's death.

Each time the people in this story have a choice to make, they make a bad one. Having heard John's legitimate criticism, Herod locks him up for speaking the truth. He treats his step-daughter not like family but as entertainment. When Herodias could have anything she possibly wants, she chooses to kill someone. Salome goes along with the violent request, and far from expressing any remorse, makes an even worse spectacle of it. Herod regards the opinion of his guests as more important than a human life. The fact that, culturally, Herod would be more respected for granting this heinous request than for protecting a real person shows how lost the society really is. As this passage begins with Herod connecting John to Jesus, and really as Mark's whole gospel begins with John preparing the way for Jesus, this unjust tragedy foreshadows the violent, power-hungry evil that will rise up against Jesus' way of peace, love, and mercy.

Herod's palace intrigue may be an extreme example, but we human beings have made and continue to make a mess of the beautiful creation God has given us and we have and continue to do violence against the community that God has gifted us. Looking at 2000 years of Christianity, we have to admit that at times we've spectacularly lost the plot throughout our history of religiously motivated division, exploitation, colonialism, and persecution. So if the gospel is supposed to be *good news*, where do we find it in this story that, as opposed to the hopeful fiction of Esther, so clearly shows that "real life" is inescapably brutal? Listen to the last verse: *When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.* What brave, faithful defiance to believe that although this world can kill the messenger, it can never kill the message. God's way of selfless loving mercy will forever be at odds with the heartless corruption of this world, yet we are called to follow it anyway. Even and especially when the world is at its most desperate, may we trust that the Almighty One who overcame even death will prevail in life.