

Sermon: The Death of John the Baptist

New North Church, Hingham

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26 June 2022

Based on **Psalm 16; Mark 6:14-29**

Mark's Gospel might be my favorite among the four, partly because it's so short but also because of the way he tells the story. He doesn't waste words, he means what he says, and he's not above fudging the facts to make a political or literary point.

As far as I know, he's also the only New Testament writer to use a flashback to frame his narrative in a purposeful way.

This happens to be the only story in Mark's Gospel where Jesus has no active role and is not even mentioned by name. In fact, the story is not directly related to Jesus at all, and John, who is at the center of the scene, never says a word. And, aside from John's cruel and senseless death described here, there is a lot wrong in today's Gospel passage.

First, the Herod in this story is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who played such a large role in chapter two of Matthew's Gospel. This Herod is no king; he is a *tetrarch*. In the Roman world, a tetrarch was one who ruled one-quarter of a region as a subordinate to the governor. Herod ruled Galilee and Perea; his two brothers ruled three other provinces. Mark calls him *King* Herod perhaps to contrast his non-kingdom with Jesus' coming kingdom of God.

Herod doesn't look so good in this story and is maybe feeling a little guilty over what he did. Maybe he is even feeling haunted by John's murder. Mark can get away with such a portrayal because Herod Antipas was already dead in Mark's time. And no one would argue.

Second, there is some confusion about who Jesus was, and that is a theme that runs throughout Mark's Gospel, despite the very first verse where Mark calls Jesus the Son of God. Some said Jesus was Elijah, who was last seen in the last verse of the last book in the Hebrew Bible (Malachi 4:5-6) and was supposed to be the new Messiah. But apparently, John, who came to prepare the way for Jesus, was also thought to be the new Elijah, even down to the way he dressed (Mark 1:6).

But John and Jesus were always two separate people, one following the other. Even so, Jesus' identity was still in question. So that would be on our minds as we keep reading.

Third, in a historic sense, Herod's birthday banquet would not have happened that way.

It would have been inappropriate for a young girl to dance at such a banquet, first of all. And, as a tetrarch, Herod had no authority to give up a portion of his 'kingdom' to anyone.

Mark took a story from the Book of Esther and reworked it in order to explain what happened to John. There are even echoes of Ahab and Jezebel in this story. Back in First Kings, Ahab opposed Elijah but feared him too, even though he liked to listen to him (1 Kings 18), just as Herod feared John politically but thought he was a good guy to talk to.

And did Herod have to cut off John's head? Strictly speaking, he could have had John brought to the banquet alive and in one piece; his wife only asked for John's head with no mention of separating it from his body; her daughter added the bit about the platter, which made it problematic.

Notice that John's disciples then took his *body* – perhaps leaving the head on the platter – and laid it in a tomb.

A Catholic priest and scholar named Eugene LaVerdiere wrote that 'raising someone from illness is not the same as raising someone from death...and raising someone from death is not the same as raising someone who was beheaded.'¹ This may have been another way for Mark to show how Jesus was greater than John because only Jesus was resurrected.

And finally, Mark interrupts his narrative flow to tell us about John's death. Why would Mark do this? And why would he include so much detail?

What Mark has done, and it's hard to see at first, is sandwich a story that highlights the risks of preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 3:2, Mark 1:4) in between the missionary work of the Twelve and the feeding of the five thousand.

The effect is to show how the mission of the Twelve brought Jesus to Herod's attention along with questions of Jesus' identity. That gave Mark a way to bring into the story the tradition of prophets speaking out against the king and then suffering rejection and persecution. It also has the effect of anticipating how Jesus was handed over, executed, and laid in a tomb.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, people raise questions about Jesus' identity. Earlier in chapter six, for example, after preaching in his hometown, someone asked, isn't this Mary's kid? Where did he get all this? What is this wisdom that has been *given* to him? (Mark 6:2-3)

Identity goes beyond what a person looks like; it gets into who a person is, what they do, and how they do it. Jesus is the real deal, especially in contrast to a pretender like Herod.

Mark drove home the point for his readers that they might suffer a demeaning and painful death for doing the work Jesus called them to do.

In our time, people are persecuted simply for being who they are, whether or not they are actively proclaiming the Gospel. An identity as a religious person is enough to invite trouble, and this applies to Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and many others, not just to Christians.

For some weird reason, the powerless often make the powerful nervous or fearful, and that may be because when the powerless look to God for deliverance and salvation, the powerful lose their grip and can no longer influence what people think or say or do.

In Nigeria, Islamist militants kill and kidnap Christians during worship services as a way to intimidate them. In Bethlehem, the Christian population has dropped from 84% a hundred years ago to just 22% in 2007. Political instability, residency permit issues, disillusionment with the peace process, and economic problems all contribute to the decline, but the main factor driving Christian emigration from Bethlehem is persecution, whether it's from discrimination when seeking employment to the simple fact that Muslims don't want them there.²

In China, a major trading partner, more than 100 million Christians are systematically discriminated against, controlled, and subjected to religious persecution by the Communist Party for "ideological conformity" – or lack of it.³

And in the United States, people are burning churches for no good reason.

Persecution and violence against anyone for any reason is wrong. Like many persecuted people around the world today, John had no voice in the story of his own death. When that changes, when people give themselves power to speak, kingdoms fall.

God never actually asked anyone to overthrow a government, or to wage war on a weaker population just because. God is not an intimidator though God can be quite intimidating.

What God did say came through prophets like Amos, who proclaimed:

Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate; (Amos 5:15)
let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (5:24)

And through Micah:

What does the Lord require of you
but to *do* justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8b)

Too often, we lose sight of what God wants. When we let hubris get in our way, we leave all humility, and maybe God too, behind.

But Jesus set us straight. He broke it all down into two easy-to-remember commandments. He made it so simple for us. He said, “love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might,” and “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Therein lies God’s grace and our salvation.

Amen.

¹ LaVerdiere, Fr. Eugene. *The Beginning of the Gospel: Introducing the Gospel According to Mark: Vol. 1.* Liturgical Press, 1999. 161.

² <https://forthemartyrs.com/palestines-vanishing-christian-population/>

³ <https://www.christianitydaily.com/articles/12686/20210726/christians-in-china-experienced-increased-persecution-and-hardship-from-ccp-under-xi-jinping-report.htm>