

The End of Innocence

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Third Presbyterian Church

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Mark 6:14-29

How is this the Word of the Lord? That's the question that jumps out of today's story. How is this tale of power and jealousy and guilt and fear and lust and ultimately murder the Word of the Lord? It's the question that every commentator I read this week asks of this text. It has no obvious takeaway. It has no heroes. It has a grisly ending. And, as every commentator also pointed out, in a Gospel that is otherwise concise and spare on details - a Gospel that Karoline Lewis calls "the Reader's Digest Condensed Version of the Jesus story,"¹ this story takes up a lot of narrative real estate only to put the worst of humanity on display.

We enter today's text right where last week's left off, where Jesus had been teaching and healing to great acclaim in other towns, and to resistance in his own hometown. He gave his twelve disciples a few instructions and then sent them out into the world to carry out his mission. They called on all to repent, and they healed people through the power Jesus gave them.

Up until the time that Jesus began his ministry, John the Baptist was the greatest prophet anyone had ever encountered. So when word spread about Jesus and all he was doing, Herod wondered if John had been raised from the dead.

Now cue the movie's flashback in time, and roll the footage:

Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee, had broken Jewish law by marrying his brother's wife. John the Baptist pointed out this embarrassing lapse of judgment. Infuriated, Herod's wife pressured him to get rid of him once and for all (if you know what I mean). Even though Herod actually kind of liked John, despite some of the puzzling things he said, and even though he didn't kill him then as Herodias asked, Herod caved, threw John in prison, and hoped that would be enough to satisfy her anger.

Soon, it was Herod's birthday, and he threw a party for himself. He wanted so desperately to impress his peers that he made *his own daughter* dance in front of them while they watched and maybe even ogled. They all loved it so much that Herod offered her whatever she wanted. As one of my seminary friends once said, "It must have been some dance!"

When at mom's urging his daughter requested John's head, right there in front of everyone who'd just heard Herod's generous offer, he couldn't say no. Because the one thing you don't do when you're in power is look weak; or before you know it all your loyal supporters will start abandoning you in droves.

So in spite of his deep misgivings, in spite of his respect for John, Herod ordered the murder - a grim reminder to be careful what you ask for. Once again, personal expediency trumps justice.

¹ Karoline Lewis, "Beheading the Gospel," <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5197>

I wish I could say the women in this story come off better, but not necessarily. It's hard to find sympathy for Herod's wife in this tale. She, too, is a woman of status and wealth. Maybe she is as evil as Mark portrays her, for she uses her own daughter to exact revenge on the prophet. Or maybe, as Lia Scholl posits, her one-dimensional character is simply a great literary tool.² Or maybe it's all a classic case of "blame the woman" that pervaded not only ancient patriarchal societies but still plays out today. We don't know the mind of Mark - all we have is the text before us.

Then look at the dynamics between Herod and his daughter, where there's a possible #MeToo moment. The text is understated, but really - what kind of father asks his daughter to perform as a dancer at a party where a bunch of guys with titles are eating and drinking to their hearts' content? And for all of us who say she should have refused to dance, if the #MeToo movement has underscored anything, it's the very real possibility that she didn't even feel like she had that option. Note who had the power in that relationship - Herod - as her father, as political leader, as agent of the Roman Empire. So we can now add potential abuse and exploitation to our already long litany of sin and brokenness in Herod's world.

The worst of humanity, indeed.

The story resonates with so much in our world. Herod isn't the only one who abuses power on the national or international stage. The objectification and harassment of women certainly didn't end when all of the candles on Herod's birthday cake had been blown out. John the Baptist wasn't the only one detained indefinitely for no justifiable reason. And putting political expediency over execution of justice for the oppressed? Let me count the ways.

Herod's story also resonates with the darker places we personally inhabit. We may not abuse power on the world stage, but we are certainly susceptible in our own hierarchies of relationships. We are afraid of appearing weak or vulnerable. We hold grudges. We seek recognition for its own sake. We like status symbols. We stay silent when we hear someone use a racial slur. We don't want to make a scene. We fail to challenge the structures of society that privilege us over others. We fear the consequences of speaking up, even if they're benign compared to the consequences John the Baptist faced.

Herod's story exposes the ugly truth that rears its head and demands to be reckoned with. Herod's story interrupts the public narrative we so carefully craft, and he does so with flashing lights and the noise of a blaring car alarm.

Movies and TV series use flashbacks to shed light on their main characters' motivations. When a show flashes back in time, it can be disorienting. Do you ever experience that? You get so caught up in the storyline of the flashback that for a good long time, you lose track of the larger, ongoing story.

In this flashback to Herod's deadly birthday bash, the Gospel writer gives details that are so sensational and so tabloid-worthy that it's easy to lose track of the larger, ongoing story that is summed up in the very first words of the Gospel, which are: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

² Lia Scholl, "Bad Girl of the Bible? Or Bad King?" from *The Hardest Question*, July 8, 2012.

The thing about flashbacks is that they make little sense without the stories wrapped around them. Wrapped around Herod's story is the story of God's love for the world made known to us in Jesus. Love for Herod's sordid, broken world, and for ours.

The Gospel of Mark tells us how Jesus sent out his twelve disciples into the world with the power to heal and the power to make whole. Then it follows up with this flashback which lays bare the reality of the world. It tells the truth about a world where power corrupts and privilege seduces people into doing things that they never thought they would do. Jesus said this is the world I came to love – the disgusting, repulsive one, the one where humanity messes up time and again. This is the world into which I'm sending my disciples with my power to heal. This is the world for which I will give up my own life.

I'm not sure I've ever seen a show or a movie that ends with a flashback. They always come back around to the other side. Which is what this Gospel does.

On the other side of Herod's story is the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. While many of us probably remember that one, with the rise of the so-called "spiritual but not religious," we can no longer assume everyone knows it. So allow me to briefly recap: Jesus and his disciples spend all day teaching the crowds, who can't get enough and will not leave. It gets late, and there's no food. So the disciples find a boy with five loaves of bread and two fish. They take it, and as they pass the food out to folks, it multiplies so there's enough for everyone. It is a far cry from the birthday banquet Herod hosted. Barbara Lundblad said that Mark wants us to hear [the difference] between Herod's "banquet of death" and Jesus' "banquet of life."³

Mark's Gospel is all about truth-telling – the human dilemma is tragic and impossible to face; yet Jesus comes again and again to change the story from evil to redemption, from emptiness to abundance, from death into life, .

I, like the rest of the world, have been captivated by the story of the 12 boys and their coach who were trapped in a cave in Thailand for over two weeks. As the details behind their rescue have begun to emerge, it seems like I can't read enough about it.

One detail from a story in the Washington Post particularly captured my attention. It was the point where the rescue of the first boy would commence. They'd strung the ropes throughout the maze of chambers. They'd placed air tanks up and down the stretch of passageways. They'd put a wetsuit and an oxygen mask on him, and had given him something to help him relax. The final step of preparation before the rescue divers would pull the boy through the murky water was to "swaddle him in a flexible plastic stretcher - akin to a tortilla wrap... to confine his limbs and protect him" from the jagged walls. "And then the diver kept the swaddled boy in a body-to-body clinch for as much of the swim as possible."

Friends, let us be swaddled in God's overarching story of grace and healing, even as we dare to encounter the world as it is, the murky and complicated and broken world into which Jesus has sent us. Let us breathe in the rich oxygen of God's story, let it saturate every ounce of our being, that we may confront the truths of our lives and find courage to confront injustice in all its guises.

³ http://day1.org/1259-two_very_different_banquets

And, let us cling to Jesus and his story every moment of the journey. Amen.