

VIII Pentecost: Proper 10 (Year B)

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

Psalm 24

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-29

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“King Herod heard of it.” This morning, we pick up in Mark's Gospel where we left off last week. To refresh our memories, Jesus has sent the twelve apostles out two by two among the villages of Galilee, to proclaim repentance, cast out demons, and anoint the sick. Where they were welcomed, they stayed. Where rejected, they shook the dust from their feet. Well, they must have been doing a pretty good job with this mission of evangelism, because when we pick up this morning, we hear, “King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known.” Jesus is making a stir. The Gospel is being heard in Galilee. People are noticing. Word has come to Herod, in this case Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who we know from the story of the wise men in Matthew's Gospel, the king who slaughtered the Holy Innocents, the first born male children of Bethlehem, in an attempt to snuff out the incarnate Word of God who, proclaimed as King of Israel, posed such a threat to his fragile ego. Things aren't much better in this generation with Herod junior, who is ruling a smaller bit of land than dad but still a puppet of the Roman Empire.

Word about Jesus has spread from the smallest to the most elite segments of Judean society, from the men and women being healed all the way to the king. “King Herod heard of it.” This simple sentence tells us at least two important things about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. First: that when the good news is proclaimed, when the healing, forgiving love of God is shown, people notice. People notice when this story of love, which runs so counter to the stories our societies love to tell, is told. And second: the disciples were the ones out in the villages this time, not Jesus. Did you catch that last week? Jesus sent the twelve, and today we learn that what they did, in Jesus' name, made the name of Jesus known. When we tell this story—when we, the Church, the heirs of this group of twelve, proclaim forgiveness, and heal the sick, and cast out the demons of our own age, it is Jesus' name that is made known, and not our own. And that is good news indeed, especially if you feel as inadequate or as fallen or as sinful as I do, when faced with the call to make the Gospel heard in this world. “Herod heard of it.”

Now, where does this land us? The story before us, of course, is one of the most graphic in the New Testament—the beheading of Saint John the Baptist. Its inclusion in the New Testament should make us pause and reconsider the easy distinction we often make between the violence of the Old Testament and the peace and love of the new. There is plenty of violence in the New Testament, not least the passion of Jesus Christ in the Gospels, or the cosmic battle of good and evil in the Revelation to John. And this is certainly a violent tale. It's a flashback, really. Herod heard of this Jesus figure and thought, with horror, that maybe he was John the Baptist come back to life, whom he had killed earlier. What we get is the story of that death, caught up as it is in the intrigues of court life complete with lavish partying, incest, corruption, and sexual undertones. Why did Herod kill John? Well, it seems that John, in his preaching, had drawn

attention to the scandals of Herod's court and his family, scandal which puts any tabloid headline we could write today to shame. Bear with me as I sort this out; it's rather complicated, and we're helped a bit from historians of the period who fill in some of the gaps that Mark takes for granted that his readers know.

Herod has cast off his first wife for another woman, Herodias. If that weren't bad enough, it turns out that Herodias is his sister-in-law, the wife of his brother Philip. Oh, and Herodias herself happens to be the daughter of another of Herod's brothers, according to the Jewish historian Josephus.¹ Herodias has a daughter of her own from this first marriage, also called Herodias in Mark, but whom other sources call Salome, a name we know from this story in art and opera. This is the girl who is dancing for the man who is now her step-father, but also her uncle or great-uncle, depending on how you count the score (her mother was first Herod's niece, then sister-in-law, and now wife). John, not surprisingly, saw a problem with this, for by marrying his brother's wife while he is still alive, Herod has broken Jewish law, specifically the Levitical purity codes that governed sexual morality.² Herodias, not happy with the public scorn, wants John dead, and the opportunity comes in the sickening story we just heard, a story that ends with a child carrying the head of a saint on a plate.

What can we say about Herod's character in this story? Well, we read in Mark that Herod actually liked John's preaching, and least until it was directed at him. We read, "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him." Are we starting to get an image of Herod as a ruler? A man of great earthly power who recognizes the in-breaking of the kingdom of God and is slightly puzzled about it. The world is taking notice! This message of good news is captivating (and perplexing) kings. But what goes wrong here? Herod turns out to be rather weak despite all of his authority—he can identify the power of the love of God but chooses to play by the rules of this world, much like Pilate will do in sentencing Jesus to death. Herod is bound by the justice of this world, by his oaths, by his regard for his elite guests, and even when he knows what is right, he caves to this perverted sense of justice, and kills the holy prophet of God.

And when we read this story in the context of Mark's Gospel, we catch a glimpse of something profound and yet sad. This is how the powers of the world react to the good news of Jesus Christ. You see, immediately after this story, the apostles return to Jesus and give him an update of what they had done on the road. The beheading of John the Baptist is placed right in the middle of this sending out of the twelve, who are doing the things that Herod hears about. I do not think that this is an accident. Could Mark be telling us what might happen to us when we go out into the world? Jesus will pick up on this theme in just a couple chapters, when he tells a crowd of his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will lose it."³ Legend tells us that many of the twelve met their deaths as martyrs of the faith, and in case we Americans living with the privilege of our religious freedom forget, Christians are still beheaded in this world. Instead of being served up

¹ William C. Placher, *Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 93.

² Leviticus 18:16; 20:21

³ Mark 8:34-35

on platters, they're posted in videos on the internet. The Herods of the world are still hearing the good news, and some are still reacting in the same way.

We could read this story as an excuse to stay inside, to not go out and share the good news of Jesus Christ with the world. We could stay safe and judge the world from a distance. And if this were the end of the story, I couldn't blame us. But you see, we weren't instructed to judge the world, but rather to be agents of its transformation, to heal the sick, proclaim forgiveness of sins, and cast out demons in the name of Jesus. And when the Herods of any age react in violence, we remember that the story does not end with this banquet of death. In fact, there is another banquet, just a few short verses after this one. It isn't a banquet of death, but a banquet of life. It's the feeding of the five thousand, and again, I don't think its placement is an accident. It happens right after the apostles return to Jesus from their mission in Galilee. At this banquet, no one is beheaded, no one is exploited. At this banquet, Jesus takes, blesses, and breaks five loaves of bread, and gives them to the hungry people. And later, before he dies, Jesus will take another loaf and do the same—take, bless, break, and give it to his disciples—bread that will become his very body.

The good news of John's death is that it's not the end of the story. When we are baptized, and go out into the world to do the work Christ has given us to do, we take part in another banquet and we become subjects of a different kingdom with a different kind of king. What are the riches of this banquet? Paul tells us a little bit about it in his letter to the Ephesians today. This banquet is marked by redemption, forgiveness, the lavishes of grace. The host of this banquet is the King of Kings himself, and the table is set with his very body and blood week after week at this altar. It isn't an easy banquet; it comes through the cross, and it has its own kind of blood. But it's not a head on a platter. It's the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation. So come to this banquet of life, and let Herod hear of it.