

Pastor's Message – 7/14/24
Mark 6:14-29

Today in our Bible reading, we have a story: a story of a prophet, a king, an evil queen, and a dancing princess. It is a story of a birthday party, King Herod's birthday, a birthday party that ends in murder.

The prophet and the king

Once upon a time, a certain king -- his name was Herod Antipas -- became aware of an itinerant preacher from Nazareth who was performing all sorts of miracles. King Herod wasn't technically a king but a *tetrarch* or Roman-appointed governor of the territory of Galilee and Perea. His father, Herod the Great, was called a king, but he, too, was really one in name only, being a client of Emperor Augustus at the time Jesus was born.

Rumors about this Jesus had been circulating and people speculated about who he was. Some thought he was John the Baptist raised from the dead, others Elijah and still others thought he was one of the prophets (vv. 14-15). Notice that these are the same rumors Jesus' own disciples mentioned when he would later ask, "Who do you say that I am?" (8:27-30). The king was convinced that only one of those rumors could be true -- that John the Baptist, the prophet whom he had both feared and revered, had come back from the dead (6:16).

This is where Mark gives us the party flashback. King Herod arrested John and put him in prison because the prophet had condemned the king's marriage to the queen -- who happened to be his brother's ex-wife. The king saw himself as a sort of modern messiah, working, as he was, on the temple in Jerusalem as his father had done. John attacked that line of thinking by saying in effect that no real messiah would do the kinds of shameful things that Antipas had done.

The hateful queen

Once upon a time, there was a hateful queen.

And what had Antipas done? He had fallen in love, or in lust, with his niece, Herodias, who was the wife of his half-brother Herod II (called "Philip" in the New Testament, not to be confused with his full brother Herod Philip who was tetrarch of the area east of the Jordan). They'd met around A.D. 29 when the king visited his half-brother Philip on the way to Rome. As for the niece, the idea of becoming the wife of a tetrarch appealed to her, and she agreed to marry him if Antipas got a divorce from his first wife.

So he did.

And so she did. Herodias divorced Philip and moved into the king's palace where they hoped to live happily ever after.

But not only was this marriage a political problem, it was also a major violation of Jewish law which forbade marriage to a brother's wife unless it was to

raise a deceased brother's children by a levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5; Mark 12:19). In this case, Philip was not only alive, but he and Herodias had a daughter together.

Herodias saw John the Baptist as a pain in her aspirations and wanted him dead and out of the way (Mark 6:19).

The king, on the other hand, feared and protected John because he was a holy man and he liked his preaching even if he didn't quite get it (v. 20).

The king should have been more than "disturbed" at what John was preaching. John was proclaiming nothing less than the coming of the real messiah (1:7-8). The kind of kingdom and power that Antipas desired was nothing compared to the one who would usher in the kingdom of God. The king would be confused about Jesus until the end. He never realized that the one who wore the crown of thorns was the real royalty.

The dancing princess

Once upon a time, there was a dancing princess.

When the king's birthday rolled around, he decided to throw a party for himself and invite the rich and powerful members of his court. Jews generally didn't celebrate birthdays, but the Romans and Greeks did and the king, being an aficionado of all things Roman, wanted to party down.

The parties of the Herodian court were legendary for their excesses, and we can be sure that King Herod Antipas indulged in more than a few glasses from the punch bowl. Herodias, seeing her chance to influence her new husband and bump off that annoying prophet, had her daughter dance for her new husband.

There is some confusion about the identity of this "daughter." Most scholars believe that she was actually his stepdaughter, the daughter of his brother Philip. The Roman Jewish historian Josephus says her name was Salome. The gospel writer, Mark, seems to indicate that she was named after her mother Herodias. Most of what we think we know about her, however, comes not from history but from Oscar Wilde's play about her, Salome, and the Richard Strauss' opera Salome, based on a German translation of Wilde's play.

Loosened up and lusty from partying, Antipas went gaga over his stepdaughter (another no-no) and made a rash oath that he would give her anything she wanted, even half his kingdom, which wasn't his to give in the first place (vv. 22-23). When the daughter asked her mom, the nasty queen was ready with the request: "I want you to give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter" (v. 25).

The king was now trapped by his own words. Not wanting to lose face in front of the members of his court, he reluctantly ordered the prophet's head served up on a plate. The girl gave it to her mother, as though she were giving her mother a birthday present (vv. 26-28).

A little family therapy might be in order for Herod's clan, don't you think? This bunch invented dysfunctional family units. So, I've invited a therapist to come to speak to Herod about the events and the consequences of that birthday party.

Therapist: King Herod, how did you *feel* that night when your wife insisted on John the Baptizer's head?

Herod: I didn't *feel* anything. I order killings and executions all the time.

Therapist: Are you sure about that? I understood that you rather enjoyed listening to John.

Herod: Ah, he was okay, I guess. I didn't understand half of what he was saying, but he had a way about him.

Therapist: He was holy?

Herod: Of course he was holy. That's why I was looking out for him.

Therapist: So why kill him?

Herod: She made me, that's why! I'm more afraid of her than I am of any army, or any holy man. She's a wily fox...she asked me for his head in front of everyone so that I would lose face by saying no.

Therapist: What if I told you that no one can *make* you do what you don't want to do? You had a *choice* Herod.

And with that, Herod hung his head and sat in a deep and foreboding silence until the hour was up.

Herod made a promise he couldn't back down from. He spoke words that he couldn't un-say. We all occasionally say things that would be better left unsaid. We will blurt out an indiscretion, let slip some embarrassing truth or foolishly create a bad situation by a thoughtless remark or promise. American author Edgar Allan Poe blamed such careless utterances on "the imp of the perverse," while Sigmund Freud ascribed them to the "counter will." The French called such gaffes a 'faux pas' — literally a 'false step.' This expression goes back to the days of Louis XIV, a period when etiquette demanded everyone must dance perfectly. Making a 'false step' during one of the Royal balls was to risk expulsion from court.

King Herod, in the text today, commits the ultimate *faux pas*. Herod had taken Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, to be his bride. This brought him the condemnation of John. Herod arrested him, and Herodias hated him. On Herod's birthday, Herodias' daughter danced for Herod and his guests. He was overcome with delight and he blurted out a promise he'd soon regret. She could have anything, up to half of the kingdom. She went out to her mom and came back with the request, John's head on a platter. That wasn't part of Herod's plan, and he didn't want to do it, but he'd made a promise.

The moral of the story might be not to make promises we can't keep. The moral of the story might be not to say things we may regret. The moral of the story might be to **follow** and **listen** to the people we **should** follow.

Considering the intent and purpose of the gospel of Mark, have you wondered why Mark tells this story? Mark doesn't say anything about Jesus' birth or give a resurrection account... but we get an extended section on Herod and John. Mark's gospel is short and to the point, but we get intricate details of Herod's marital situation and birthday party. Mark is a short telling of the gospel of Jesus written for a people scared and persecuted. Jerusalem had either just fallen or was about to, and Mark's people were frightened beyond words....

There is always the danger in religious circles to think that if you're on God's Team then everything will be great. You'll be healthy, wealthy, and wise. God will heal every disease and conquer every foe. Well... not if you're John the Baptist. If you're John you'll be the victim of an immature girl and an impotent puppet ruler, and your head will be served on a platter.... Even the very best of us can be victim to the very worst, and sometimes even to the very worst in other people. Even so, we, like John the Baptist, belong to God and have a purpose in God's world.

John's death points ahead to the death of Jesus, who will also run afoul of powerful people with his own version of the truth. The Christian faith, built on the model of death and resurrection, calls all of us to our own death -- to the death of the old, so that the new can be born. In the end, John's disciples came to get his body, honored him, and buried him in a tomb.

Those who follow Jesus run the risk of, perhaps not beheading, but the risk of trials and suffering. But in the end, followers of Jesus are honored for their faithfulness and gifted and graced by God and those who come behind honor them for their sacrifices and their faithfulness. Our purpose is to share the light and love of God to others.

I've put an easel pad in the gathering area and I invite you to take a few minutes and remember those in this Church or in your personal life of faith who have been an inspiration to you – those who have led you to faith in God and who have taught you and gifted you with their life of faith. Take a minute and write their name on that easel pad. Those of you who are off-site, post their names on the livestream and I can share those individuals with the Congregation here. Remember the founders and “movers and shakers” from the history of your church, your denomination or tradition. Remember, especially, those who put themselves at risk or lived their lives with faithfulness.

Today, we've moved out of a sermon series on Paul's 2nd Letter to the Corinthians and into the gospel of Mark, today and next week. Then, we'll spend several weeks in the gospel of John. Both Mark and John invite us to come and meet Jesus, for it is in Jesus, in our faithfulness of following Jesus, that we are healed, we are fed, and we are saved.