

Proper 10B 2015 Sermon

Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard of the demons cast out and the many who were anointed and cured, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

In our **old** Lectionary, the one printed in the back of our Prayer Books, today's Gospel lesson was never read. And you can understand why, for it is a *gruesome* story more suited for one of the CSI programs on television than for the pulpit. Princeton Bible Professor Otto Piper writes: "The preacher of this text for this Sunday's sermon receives my congratulations for originality and guts. Who preaches on the death of John the Baptist?"

(https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2503)

Who, indeed. I must admit, when I sat down to write a sermon on this Gospel text, I was at a loss. Where is there any redeeming message in this story? Why does Mark include the story in his Gospel at all? Matthew drastically shortens the account, and Luke eliminates it entirely from his Gospel.

Once again, my fallback source is the ever-insightful David Lose, whose words I once again quote liberally.

Dr. Lose believes that Mark uses this story “to draw a contrast between the two kinds of kingdoms available to Jesus disciples, both then and ever since... Mark tells this story as a flashback,” Dr. Lose notes, “out of its narrative sequence, which means he could have put this scene anywhere. But he puts it... here, ... just after Jesus has commissioned his disciples to take up the work of the kingdom of God [as we heard in last week’s Gospel] and when he then joins them in making that kingdom three-dimensional, tangible, and in these ways seriously imaginable.

“**Herod’s** Kingdom – the kingdom of the world and, for that matter, *Game of Thrones* and all the other dramas we watch because they mirror and amplify the values of our world – is dominated by the will to power, the will to gain influence over others. This is the world where competition, fear and envy are the coins of the realm, the world of not just late night dramas and reality television but also the evening news, where we have paraded before us the triumphs and tragedies of the day as if they are simply givens, as if there is no other way of being in the world and relating to each other.

“Which is why Mark places the story here. Just previous to this scene [as we heard last week] Jesus sends his disciples out in utter vulnerability, dependent on the hospitality and grace of others, to bring healing and mercy with no expectation of reward or return. And just *after* this scene comes a different kind of feast altogether [Jesus’ multiplication of the loaves and fish]... a banquet of mercy, so markedly in contrast to the birthday bash Herod throws himself that it’s almost stunning. Rather than the rich and shameless, it’s the poor and outcast that flock to Jesus’ feeding of the thousands. Rather than political intrigue and power plays dominating the day, it’s blessing and surprising abundance that characterize [the multiplication of loaves and fish].

“And that’s the choice that Mark puts before us: which kingdom do we want to live in? Or, at least recognizing that we have no choice but to live in the kingdom of the world to *some* extent, to which kingdom will we give ultimate allegiance?

“Sounds easy when I put it that way. ‘[We give allegiance to] Jesus’ kingdom,’ we’ve been trained to answer. Ah, but not so fast. [The Kingdom of God] is the world where vulnerability and sharing and mercy and justice and grace lead to abundant life, to be sure, but also where those very same qualities can get you killed, or least make you feel like you are vulnerable to being taken advantage of. And truth be told, you might be. But the other truth to be told is that you can give yourself wholly and completely to the world of power and still never, ever quite feel secure. Why? Because once you’ve accepted that **power** – whether defined as wealth or possessions or influence or whatever – is the most important thing in life, than you are always vulnerable to those with *more* power. You are, most simply, at the center of a never-ending contest where there are no ultimate winners, only those who prevail for a time until they are unseated by someone else.

“Don’t get me wrong. I love competition – ...I [recently] watched the stunning FIFA Women’s World Cup final... – but it’s not the way I want to live my life and certainly not the way I want to conduct my relationships. Which is where *Jesus’* kingdom, the kingdom of God, comes in. Because in *this* kingdom there **are** no winners or losers, just the children of God, all beloved, all welcome, all deserving of love and respect based not on their merit or accomplishments but simply because God values each and every one of us.

“Look, the kingdom Jesus proclaims can seem odd, I know, or idealistic, particularly in light of recent current events. But it’s those same stories of violence and prejudice that make me crave the kingdom of God all the more. And it’s our privilege [to participate in]... this kingdom, ...this way of being and relating, each and every [day]. So [today we set this] story of Herod... beside all those other stories big or small that echo it, reminding us how often we’ve been told it’s the only kingdom there is. And then [we] imagine that other kingdom, God’s kingdom, where all are welcome, all are valued, and all are cherished.

“ ‘When you play the game of thrones,’ a central character says early in the story of that name, ‘you win or you die. There is no middle ground.’ The kingdom of Jesus is a little different. When you play *it* – or, really, are **drawn** into it, captivated by, and surrender to it – first you die... to all you once thought was important... and then you not so much win as simply are given all you could ever want: life, love, acceptance, and purpose. That may not play as well on the evening dramas or news, but [it is the life for which we were created by God].”

Taken from [Proper 10B 2015 David Lose: A Tale of Two Kingdoms](http://www.davidlose.net/2015/07/pentecost-7-b-a-tale-of-two-kingdoms/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+davidlose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29) , Posted: 06 Jul 2015 10:56 AM PDT by David Lose
http://www.davidlose.net/2015/07/pentecost-7-b-a-tale-of-two-kingdoms/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+davidlose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29