

## **2024-07-14 Mark 6:14-29 John Beheaded SERMON**

**BY THE REVEREND CHERYL KESTER-SCHMIDT**

Today's story is gruesome yet would have probably made the front page of the National Enquirer. In case you heard only the sanitized Sunday school version, let us look at it once more. Herod is the ruler of the region; he comes from a family with no fear of killing their siblings or children. While he was vacationing in Rome he gets all hot and bothered by his brother's wife. They divorce their spouses and marry each other. Her daughter, Salome, whom scholars put as somewhere between age 13-14, comes along.

When John the Baptizer learned of this new political union between Herod and Herodias, he did the right thing as a faithful and holy Jewish prophet—he spoke out against the marriage. John told Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife" as he referred to two passages from the Torah, both in the book of Leviticus (18:16 and 20:21) which regards the union as an act of adultery and publicly disgraceful. The marriage made

them ritually impure, and a consequence was they would not be blessed with children.

John the Baptist **publicly** suggests this marriage might not be acceptable – this is what got him imprisoned. Herod is most upset because Herodias will not let it go. The fly in the ointment is Herod likes John. Granted he is a loony bug-eating prophet who lives outdoors, wears animal skins and speaks inconvenient truths. Yet Herod likes to hear him preach.

The Jews in the Galilee region, home to Jesus of Nazareth and ruled by Antipas, were outraged at this adultery and marriage. This spoken truth got John arrested in the first place and put him in conflict with Herod's new wife Herodias. She did not like John because he had publicly called out her marriage and is loudly verbal about it.

Meanwhile back at the palace, Herod throws himself a huge birthday party and invites his wife's daughter, Salome, to dance for him and the other drunk military men, business leaders and celebrities of the day. We do not know the exact nature of her

“dance,” but we do know it “pleased” Herod enough to offer her anything she wanted up to half his kingdom. This sort of tells us, she might not have been doing the Chicken dance.

Herod offers her anything up to half his kingdom – in front of those gathered to celebrate. Salome has no clue what to ask for, runs to her mom and asks her “what should I ask for?” We already can be sure of what mom will tell her - “the head of John the Baptist” and she did. This was distressing to Herod. He obviously did not want to do it, but our text says he granted her wish. Why? He had made an oath to the girl in front of his guests, and he did not want to look bad in front of them. This brought us the last course of Herod’s birthday dinner - John the Baptist’s head on a platter!

Mark’s portrayal of women in this chapter deserves a look. Mark seems to be more sympathetic toward Herod than Herodias. Her grudge against John was satisfied through her daughter’s entertainment value and exploitation. Herodias is the one most responsible for John’s death in Mark’s account.

This is a horrific tale. Mark puts the story of John the Baptist death between the commission and return of the twelve disciples which was during the height of the Jesus movement in Israel. It is important to Jesus' task spreading God's good news to more believer's. John's death also foreshadows Jesus' own death at the hands of a political, though sympathetic, figure. Remember, just before this story, we covered Jesus' rejection at home. This is the end of innocence for Jesus' story.

My sisters and brothers not much has changed in 2,000 plus years. We live in an age as faithless and corrupt as Herod's own. People quickly divorce because they fall in love with someone's wife or husband. We all distance ourselves from those who speak truths to us we might not be ready to acknowledge. Young girls are still made sexual objects for powerful men – think – Jeffrey Epstein. We have also done things to not lose face in front of others.

We can relate to Herod's actions. He was despicable, yet he is also a bit of a tragic person. He knew better. He knew killing

John was wrong and has a guilty conscience. Perhaps it was his guilt that led him to think Jesus was John returned from the grave.

It is tragic Herod died not knowing he was a beloved child of God just as John the Baptist was. Herod is different from the demoniacs, tax collectors, Scribes and Pharisees we meet in the Gospels. They encounter Christ and are freed from the bondage of their sin and past. Knowing Christ they see a bit of God's love and mercy. They are able to see they are loved by God and in His love are made new and have new endings to their stories. Herod is forever trapped in his story with no way out.

We too can feel trapped in lives we seem unable to change. We see no way to change our behavior or our attitude. We are caught in our circumstances or in our identity.

I am not sure there is any good news here today. I looked hard but also note this is the only story in Mark's Gospel where Jesus is not mentioned. It has no Jesus in our story!

This is a story of sin, manipulation, violence and incestuous feelings. But there is sliver of good here - this is not the end of the story. In the movie, Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, a character says, "in India, there is a saying in the end all will be well. If all is not well, it is not yet the end."

The story is not over! Mark follows this horrific story with the miracle of the feeding of the 5000. The horrific birthday party of Herod's is followed with a Eucharistic party - one without exploiting children or killing prophets. It is a story filled only with Jesus - Jesus on a hillside with thousands sitting on the green grass, a 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread with 12 baskets left over. A new story written by God who wants all fed and loved with no one exploited or harmed.

What good news awaits as a remedy to Herod's horrific party and Herodias odious desires. God gives us a reminder every week we are loved and cared for at this table. Our communion table is the antidote to the horrific things playing out in our lives. My sisters and brothers, we are not imprisoned. God is still writing

the story and it is better than anything we can come up with.

Thanks be to God.