

Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard of it, 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." 15 But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

17 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. 18 For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20 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. 21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 22 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." 23 And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." 24 She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." 25 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." 26 The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27 Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, 28 brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. 29 When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

A TALE OF TWO BANQUETS

It's not fair. My substitute preachers get all the easy texts. I could have easily preached on Jesus coming home to Nazareth or the sending out of the twelve.

But, no, my first Sunday home I get this story that is not so much about Jesus but about the grisly death of John the Baptist. This is a horrible story.

In some churches after the Scripture is read the pastor says, "The Word of the Lord." And the people respond, "Thanks be to God." I'm glad that's not our custom this morning. How can we say "thanks be to God" when we read a story like this?

I was tempted to just pass right over this story and go on to next week's story, the feeding of the 5,000. Now there's a story you can sink your teeth into ... so to speak. It's a much happier story about people being fed and God's work being done. Why should we read about Herod's banquet of death and deceit?

And then it hit me.

Maybe there's a reason Herod's horrible banquet immediately precedes Jesus feeding of the 5,000. Maybe Mark wants us to read these two stories together. Maybe the lectionary cuts off the story too soon.

I think that's the answer. The gospel of Mark is not meant to be read in little snippets like we do on Sunday morning. It is one total story about Jesus, the Son of God.

And so I think it's entirely appropriate for us to expand the Scripture that we read today because Mark wanted us to compare Herod's banquet with the banquet Jesus held in the wilderness. This lesson is in my opinion really a tale of two banquets.

A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

Even though we didn't read it, most of you know the story of the other banquet, the story of the feeding of the 5,000. It's found in all four gospels, and we talk about it at least once every year.

Mark's version of that story is filled with contrasts.

Jesus withdrew to be alone, but a great crowd followed him. It was a deserted place, but it became a place of great abundance.

The disciples said, "Send the people away," but Jesus said, "You give them something to eat." There were only five loaves and two small fish, but Jesus used that small amount to feed 5,000 people.

But, the biggest contrast is between Jesus' banquet of life and Herod's banquet of death.

Herod's banquet was not held in a deserted place. It was held in a lavish palace. Instead of a large crowd of hungry people Herod's banquet contained only the "important" people, the movers and shakers of the ancient world.

And Herodias was there as well. She shouldn't have been. Herod stole her from his brother. John the Baptist condemned this unlawful marriage. And as my daddy used to say, "That's when he quit preaching and went to meddling." Preachers who dare to "meddle" and make statements about the morality of the ruler are always in danger.

HEROD'S STRUGGLE

Surprisingly, in Mark's gospel Herod is not portrayed as being totally evil. Even though John condemned Herod's marriage, the text tells us that Herod liked to listen to John. Indeed, Herod even thought that John was a righteous and holy man.

But, Herod's "new" wife, Herodias was not a very good theologian. She was not happy with John. In fact she wanted John dead.

Herod was not a very strong person. He always wanted to do the easy thing to please others. And so Herod put John in prison to appease his wife.

But, Herod didn't kill John. Somewhere deep inside Herod knew that John was right, that he was indeed God's prophet. Yet Herod was afraid of John. He was afraid of the truth that John might tell him, and he was afraid of what others might think.

And so we get to the weird part of the story. Herodias' daughter dances for the ruler and his cronies at his birthday party.

Some commentators say that this was a rather suggestive dance. And other mainly female commentators say that this is just men messing up the story, making the women into the bad ones instead of placing the blame where it really belongs ... on the man in charge, Herod. He was the one who had the power.

A STUPID PROMISE

We don't really know exactly what happened. But, what we do know is this; Herod made a really stupid promise. He told his stepdaughter that since she had done such a beautiful dance he would give her anything she wanted, even up to half his kingdom.

That must have been some dance or maybe we should blame the wine. Whatever happened this thoughtless oath gave evil an opportunity to take root.

As I read this I was reminded of another thoughtless promise. Remember when Jacob made a nice bowl of stew? And Jacob told his famished brother, Esau, "If you give me your birthright, I'll give you this bowl of stew." And so Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of stew. And that stupid promise created conflict in the family that lasted for generations.

The Bible warns us against making careless statements. James wrote that our "yes" should be "yes" and our "no" should be "no." That's still true. How many problems have come into our life because of thoughtless statements we have made in the heat of the moment?

But, Herod was not smart enough to avoid careless oaths. Instead, he told Herodias' daughter in front of important witnesses that he would give her anything, up to half his kingdom. Surely he was just exaggerating to impress his friends. And who would have thought that the girl would ask for John's head on a platter?

I think it's odd that he promised half his kingdom to this little dancing girl. Herod only ruled a fourth of Judea and that was at the reluctant pleasure of the Romans. One commentator said that it was like offering someone half interest in a rented car!

But, Herod didn't have to worry about the daughter of Herodias. Herodias herself was the

one who was pulling the strings. And when the little girl told her mom what the king had promised Herodias did not hesitate. She said, "Ask for the head of John the Baptist."

She dutifully went to Herod and made the request ... adding her own little twist. She wanted the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

A BANQUET OF DEATH

Of course that phrase... having someone's head on a platter ... has become the classic expression of revenge from that day on. But, again we see that Herod Antipas ... at least on some level did not want to hurt John. He was deeply grieved by the request.

But, on the other hand, his instincts for personal and political survival were too deeply ingrained, and immediately he gave the command so that he wouldn't lose face before his subjects. He said, "Bring me the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And it was done.

Herod's birthday celebration was turned into a banquet of death. Revenge was the final course. But, revenge did not taste sweet. It intensified the fear and loathing that the people felt toward their weak and capricious ruler. And Herod regretted this decision for the rest of his life.

Herod could have made a different choice. He loved to listen to John the Baptist. In his heart of hearts Herod knew that John was right.

But, Herod's life was dominated by the quest for power and prestige. Herod could not appear to be weak or vacillating. Herod could not risk his own reputation to spare John's life.

In many ways this story foreshadows the coming storm. Herod acts much like another ruler, a man named Pilate.

Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent and tried every trick in the book to free him.

But, when push came to shove Pilate also showed that he was more worried about keeping his job than administering justice. He tried to wash his hands of the whole affair, but I suspect the death of Jesus dogged Pilate for the rest of his life.

A GUILTY CONSCIENCE

We know that the death of John the Baptist bothered Herod. The lesson that precedes our lesson for today talks about the fact that Jesus not only preached and healed; he also sent his disciples out to preach and heal. The word about this powerful new preacher was out.

And people were speculating about who Jesus might be.

Some thought that he might be Elijah, the prophet who was taken directly to heaven and

was thought to be the one who would return and herald the coming of the Messiah. Some thought that Jesus was bringing in a new era, that he was a prophet who could speak with authority.

And, strangely enough there was a third group. This group believed that somehow Jesus was the reincarnation of the powerful prophet who had just been murdered by Herod. They thought that Jesus was John the Baptist returned from the dead.

When Herod heard about what Jesus and his disciples were doing, he did not hesitate to say what he thought. We can see that his guilty conscience had not given him a day's rest since he did what was personally and politically expedient instead of what was right. The king said without hesitation, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

That wasn't literally true of course. But, in a sense we can see how it was true for Herod. Herod would forever be condemned by his bad choices and lack of moral courage. One bad choice led to another, and every capricious and unjust action made him that much weaker.

The "ghost" of John the Baptist would haunt him for the rest of his days, and the only reason any of us remember Herod Antipas at all is because of the sorry role he played in this affair.

This is still true. How many politicians have been forced out of power because they lacked moral character? We have many modern examples. People in power can quickly lose that power and become objects of derision when their lack of moral character becomes public knowledge.

That's what happened to Herod. The values of God's kingdom were discarded, and the values of the Empire were embraced. Instead of a meal filled with joy, Herod served up a final course of death and destruction.

A BANQUET OF ABUNDANCE AND GRACE

But, the banquet that Jesus holds in the wilderness stands in stark contrast. Herod's banquet is dominated by fear and regret. Jesus' banquet is dominated by abundance and grace.

The disciples tell Jesus that the hour is late and the resources are few. They want Jesus to send the people away hungry.

But, Jesus gives the disciples another answer.
"You give them something to eat."

Like Herod the disciples were operating out of fear. But, this story ends differently because they were with Jesus, and Jesus had a way of turning fear into faith. The

smallest act of faith in the hands of Jesus could become a word of eternal hope. When Jesus is present there is always more than enough to go around.

5,000 were fed in the wilderness, and they even had leftovers!

PERPLEXED?

The Scripture tells us that Herod was “perplexed” by the preaching of John the Baptist. Now why was Herod perplexed by John’s preaching? Was his preaching that hard to understand?

I don’t think so. The preaching of John as portrayed in the Bible was very simple and clear. You could summarize it in one sentence, “Repent, the kingdom of God is coming soon.”

But, if you don’t want to repent, if you don’t want to change, if you don’t want to try something or do something, then one excuse is to say, “That teaching is a bit too complex for me. Maybe I better study another theology book. Maybe we need to have another committee meeting and then it will all come clear.”

We say that Jesus is the Messiah. We say that he is the way, the truth and the life. But, when Jesus comes to us and applies that truth to our lives personally, then we are perplexed. Then we are uncertain.

Following Jesus means giving up something, and we’re not so sure that we want to do that. Following Jesus means having the courage to stand up to the crowd and we’re not so sure that we want to do that. Following Jesus means facing squarely our moral failures, and we’re not so sure that we want to do that.

Eugene Peterson put it this way, “Christ is the way as well as the truth and the life. When we don’t do it his way, we mess up the truth and we miss out on the life.”

Like Herod we sometimes become perplexed because we don’t have the courage of our convictions.

John and Jesus tell us the same thing. They tell us to repent, to turn from the old way of life so that we can embrace a new way. Don’t listen to those who say that the only way is the way of power and corruption. Listen to those who call for us to do something positive in the name of hope.

GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT

Jesus put it this way. Give the people something to eat.

Did you notice what Ed Decker had to say in our newsletter this week? A knock came at the door of the church last Wednesday, and a lady who had gotten food from our pantry

in the past stood in the doorway.

But, she was not there to ask for food. She was there to give us a generous donation for the food pantry.

The lady explained that she that she appreciated our help in the past and that now since she was working and getting some help through the Senior Center she wanted to give back to our ministry.

When I heard that story I thought about the food left over at another banquet, the feeding of the 5,000. In a time of anxiety about diminishing resources, Jesus told his disciples to use what they had and trust God for the rest.

The result was leftovers for everyone. God gave them more than what they needed.

I've just returned from our denomination's General Assembly. I'll be honest with you. These are tough times for our church. Every day began with a briefing on the financial implications of what we had decided to do the day before. In these tough economic times mission might have to be curtailed. We don't have enough resources to do all that we want to do.

In addition to our economic woes we are evenly divided over what needs to be done on many issues. Many were anxious and angry. Some said that the best we can do is defeat those who disagree with us or send them away.

But, this passage suggests a different answer. Instead of trying to get rid of those who bring us a hard message, maybe the answer is to repent of our sinful lack of faith and give those who are hungry something to eat. Instead of worrying about what we don't have we need to use what we have in faith.

LIFT THEM UP TO JESUS

We sometimes say that we save the best for last, but at General Assembly this year the best was first, Cindy Bolbach and her sermon in the opening worship service. Her words kept ringing in my ears when the debates were contentious and things didn't seem to be going very well.

Cindy talked preached on Mark 2:1-12, the healing of the paralytic. Those of you who got the e-letter may remember that I talked about this sermon in my report to the Presbytery.

In that story four men carried the paralytic to the house where Jesus was healing people. But, the crowd was so large they couldn't get near Jesus. So, in order to bring this paralyzed man to Jesus the men lifted the paralytic up on the roof, cut a hole in the roof and lowered the paralyzed man into the presence of Jesus.

Preaching from a wheelchair because of the effects of cancer that had left her paralyzed Cindy said,

“At the heart of the gospel lie disciples like these in Mark who are willing to take risks, willing to do whatever it takes to help others see Jesus ... not just those whom they like, but maybe even those whom they don’t know, those they don’t like ... willing to go up to the roof, willing to cut a hole in it.”

She continued, “Over the past two years, I have seen those disciples at work in every nook and cranny in the Presbyterian Church and over the past few months ... while I have been struggling with cancer, I have been uplifted and supported by those disciples. Many disagree with me, but they have reached out to help me to the roof, and carried me to see Jesus.

None of [our disagreements] matter without disciples who are willing to take risks for the sake of the gospel ... Let’s commit ourselves to be those disciples who will take risks, who will carry others up to the roof.”

Now don’t misunderstand. Cindy was not saying, and I am not saying that we should abandon what we believe. But, I would implore us not to let our fears about the future keep us from doing what God would have us do today.

Instead of feeding on our fears we need to learn how to feed on our faith. Instead of putting people down we need to lift people up into the arms of our blessed Savior.

The Bible tells us that faith is nourished by the bread of life, the word of God as revealed in Jesus. When we stay with Jesus we will always have something to eat, we will have something to share with others, and we will be challenged to repent. We will be challenged to change our way of living and our way of thinking in response to God’s Word.

We will not always make the right choice in life. In fact most of us make the wrong choice more often than not.

But, there is one thing that we must guard against. We cannot allow ourselves to “kill” off the truth tellers in our life. We cannot get rid of God’s prophets simply because they have told us the hard truth about ourselves that we did not want to hear.

The message that John the Baptist preached, the message that Jesus preached and the message that the disciples of Jesus preached all began with the same, simple command. “Repent.”

Repentance is not a once and done experience. Repentance is a lifelong process. Repentance is being sensitive to the fact that we could very well be going in the wrong direction. We could very well be doing exactly the opposite of what God wants us to do.

But, God's prophets and God's Son want us to know the Good News. We can change. We can go in a different direction. We can take God's way instead of our way.

We can be saved, and we can be a force for good in the world.

Mark does tell a tale of two banquets. One banquet serves up fear and guilt. The other banquet serves up a word of everlasting hope for those who are starving for good news.

The choice is ours. Will we feed our fears or on our faith? God help us choose the latter. Amen.