

The Fearful Fox
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I like to say that the style of Mark's gospel was the style of that old detective show, Dragnet. Remember Joe Friday? He would tell witnesses who tended to talk too much, "Just the facts ma'm."

That's Mark. For example, the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness gets quite an elaborate treatment in the other gospels. But, in Mark's gospel it only gets two verses.

After the temptation Mark tells us that Jesus' ministry began after John the Baptist was arrested. Mark apparently wants us to see that the ministry of John and Jesus are connected. But, Mark in his brevity leaves us hanging.

The reader is left with more questions than answers.

Why was John arrested? Did he stay in prison? Was he tortured? Was he killed? Mark doesn't tell us until chapter 6.

But, today you're in luck. After waiting for six chapters, we finally learn what happened to John.

In the passage that precedes our lesson for today, Jesus and his disciples preach a message of repentance and heal many people throughout the land. (See Mark 6:7-13) Everyone was talking about it.

And the news even reached King Herod.
And that's where our story begins.

How would King Herod respond to the ministry of Jesus?
Listen to God's word.

Mark 6:14-29

14 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 FEARFUL KING

King Herod spent most of his life running scared.

They called Herod king, but he really wasn't.

He was just another lackey for the Romans.

When Rome asked Herod to jump, his only response was to ask, "How high?"

Of course that did not endear him to the people he was supposed to lead. In fact Herod was scared of his people because they weren't really his people.

They were just another nation under the thumb of the Roman Empire.

And so, when the wildly popular prophet, John the Baptist began to criticize Herod's morals because Herod divorced his first wife and then married his brother's wife, Herod was afraid.

Herod couldn't afford to let this go.

If John kept criticizing him, the people might rise up and insist that Herod hit the road.

Rome would be swift to remove him from power and put somebody else in charge, someone who could keep peace the Roman way, at the point of a sword.

But, there was another more important reason Herod was forced to do something about John. Herod's new wife, Herodias wanted John dead. When your wife wants someone dead, you have a problem.

Herod didn't want to kill John.

If he killed John, that too might cause the people might rise up and cause a riot and once again Rome would end his reign.

More than that, Herod was afraid that John might really be God's prophet, and he didn't sure didn't want to oppose God.

On the other hand this new wife of his was insistent.

So Herod decided on a compromise

He put John in prison.

To sum it up, Herod, the “king” was afraid of his wife. He was afraid of his people. He was afraid of the Roman empire. He was afraid of John the Baptist.

For one who was supposed to be in charge it seemed like he was afraid of his own shadow.

But, I would suggest that fear always plays a big role in politics. In fact I would contend that Herod was the model politician. He would say anything and do anything in order to stay in power.

(In fact, Herod did stay in power for 43 years so I guess he was in that regard successful.)

FOX

But, in the Bible Herod is portrayed like the cowardly lion from the Wizard of Oz.

He looks ferocious, but has the heart of a mouse.

Later when some folks told Jesus that Herod was out to kill him, Jesus didn't seem all that worried about Herod. He said,

“Tell that fox I'm going to keep on preaching and healing as I make my way to Jerusalem.

If Herod wants to kill me in Jerusalem, I'll be in good company. That's where all the prophets have been killed.”

“Fox” was a term of contempt.
Jesus was saying that Herod was worthless.

And, of course, he was.

He was a king who wasn't a king.
He wanted to be in charge but he was afraid of his own shadow.

If Herod were alive today, he would be one of those politicians who would have to consult the latest public opinion poll before making a decision.

Every action Herod took was designed to keep him in office.

The fear of losing power was the force that drove his life.

FEAR DRIVEN POLITICS

But, our lesson for today reminds of a very important point.

Fearful people can also be very dangerous people because they have no moral compass.

Their only concern is self-preservation.

If you challenge a corrupt and fearful politician, you are liable to have your head handed to you on a platter ... or you might even end up on a cross.

Even today politicians make outrageous, prejudicial statements that they know are not true.

Why do they do that?

They are trying to gain power by preying upon our fears.

The Washington Post once quoted a wealthy lobbyist who said, "There are only two engines that drive Washington: One is greed, and the other is fear."

Things haven't changed much since the days of Herod have they?

Fear and greed still provide the motivation for many politicians, and they are on full display at Herod's birthday party.

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

Herod threw a birthday party for himself (maybe because no one else would do it), and he invited all the movers and shakers in his world to attend. I suspect that the wine was flowing by the time Herod's daughter (who was also Herod's niece) came in and danced the dance of the seven veils. It was a big hit.

In fact the besotted king was so taken by the dance that he made a rash promise.

“Ask for anything and I’ll give it to you, up to half of my kingdom.”

Now this little girl had everything.

She was a princess after all.

So, she went to her mother and asked,

“What should I ask for?”

Mommie dearest had an answer.

Ask for the head of John the Baptist.

And since the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, the daughter adds her own gruesome touch to the request. She tells the king,

“I want you to give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

The banquet of the powers that be always require that someone’s head is served up on a platter. It’s a part of the process.

The Bible tells us that Herod didn’t want to kill John the Baptist because he was afraid of how the people might react. But, Herod was also afraid of what might happen if word got around that he was turning chicken.

After all, he had sworn before many witnesses that he would give the girl anything she wanted. And so he killed John or at least he had his people kill John.

Herod’s soldier beheaded the prophet, put his head on a platter and presented it to Herod’s daughter.

And Herod’s daughter brought the grisly prize to her mom.

RETURNED FROM THE DEAD

And that’s our lesson for today, the word of the Lord. But, it’s kind of hard to say “thanks be to God” for a story like this.

What are we to make of this story?

In the light of current events, this is another story that we might even want to avoid.

The key to understanding why Mark tells this story in such detail is found in the immediate context.

Remember that before we read about Herod's gruesome birthday party, we learned that Jesus sent his disciples out to do the work of the kingdom. They took no bread, no bag, and no money. They were to trust in the hospitality of others for all those things.

But, what Jesus did give those disciples was a new kind of message and power.

He gave them the message of repentance, the message that change is possible.

And with that message of repentance came the power to heal. The message of repentance allowed all kinds of demons to be cast out and lives were changed forever.

And because of that, Jesus was becoming famous. People were beginning to ask, "Who is this Jesus? Where does he and his disciples get this power?"

Some said that Jesus was Elijah, Israel's most powerful prophet who has returned to herald the coming of God's kingdom. Some said that Jesus was a prophet in his own right, a messenger from God like the prophets of old.

But, many said something that made Herod's blood run cold.

They said that Jesus was John the Baptist returned from the dead.

And Herod said, "They're right. I know it. John has been raised from the dead."

It seems that Herod, this "Fearful Fox" knew instinctively that Jesus was a threat to his kingdom.

In the ministry of Jesus Herod recognized yet another challenge to his power. To Herod it felt like John the Baptist was still alive in the work of Jesus and his disciples.

You see, you can't kill God's truth just by getting rid of the messenger. God's truth has a way of rising from the dead and coming back to confront you.

No matter how many heads roll there will come a day of reckoning for those who claim to be king. There will come a day of reckoning for those who claim a power that belongs only to God.

And Herod knew instinctively that his day of reckoning has drawn near.

The kingdom of God was coming, but it would not come in the palace where fearful kings threw banquets for the rich and powerful and lopped off the head of God's prophet.

No, the kingdom of God was coming in the most unlikely of places. In that place, the poor would be lifted up and the high and mighty would be knocked down a peg or two.

Jesus sent his disciples out to preach the gospel and heal the people with nothing more than a promise. But, that promise proved powerful enough to shake up even the rich and famous.

A BANQUET OF MERCY

And in the very next passage after our lesson Mark tells us about another banquet that stands in striking contrast to Herod's birthday bash. We refer to this story as the feeding of the 5,000.

You'll remember that in this story, Jesus throws a banquet of mercy.

Instead of the rich and famous, the poor and the outcast are invited to this meal. This story occurs not in the halls of power but in the wilderness.

And there's the problem.

They don't have enough to eat.

And there's no place to buy any more.

But, Jesus tells his disciples to use what they have for the good of all. They take inventory and find that all they have is five loaves and two small fish.

But, it is enough.

By God's grace thousands are fed with surprising abundance.

God's grace was sufficient to supply their need.

And the moral of that story is that God's grace is sufficient to supply our need as well.

I think the story of Herod's cruelty and the story of the feeding of the 5,000 are meant to be read together. They present a striking contrast between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God.

One is a banquet of death and another is a banquet of life.

And these strikingly different banquets present us with a choice. Whom will we rely upon when the going gets rough?

In the wilderness we too are challenged to think about what we believe and what motivates our actions.

Which kingdom will earn our allegiance?

Where will we put our trust?

Will our life be dominated by fear and the influence of those who crave power?

Will we think that there is never enough and that we have to struggle to get what is ours in a dog eat dog world?

Or will we look for strength and hope and sustenance in the ministry of Jesus?

Will we take what we have, no matter how small, and trust that our Savior can provide a meal for us in the wilderness?

Will we allow faith or our fears to control our actions?

Will the wideness of God's mercy be a source of hope or a threat?

Herod killed John the Baptist.
But, the ministry of the Baptist did not remain in the grave.

First, though Jesus and his disciples and then through Christians down through the ages, the powers that be have been challenged by the gospel of grace and repentance.

God's kingdom lives on.

There's a sad note in our lesson for today.

On one level even Herod knew that John was on to something. The Bible tells us that he liked to listen to John's preaching and at every turn he was reluctant to persecute the prophet.

But, in the end Herod's fears won out over faith.
In the end Herod killed the very one who was trying to save him.

We too live in a dangerous world.
We too are tempted to trust in the powers that be instead of the power of God's grace.
We too are tempted to let our fears dominate our faith.

As a community of faith, we must resist that urge.
We see a new day coming.

And so we encourage one another to rely upon the power of love and good works. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

We serve a risen Savior and the power of his ministry continues even today.

He still calls us to repent and believe the good news.
Let us take what we have and use it for his glory.

Amen.