

**“Divine Actions and Deadly Consequences”**

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

<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

<sup>19</sup> And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, <sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. <sup>22</sup> 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." <sup>23</sup> And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom."

<sup>24</sup> She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." <sup>25</sup> 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." <sup>26</sup> 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.

## VERY BRIEF

In most cases Mark's gospel is very brief.

I like to compare the gospel of Mark to that old TV show, Dragnet. Detective Joe Friday used to say to the hysterical witness, "Just the facts m'am. Just the facts."

That's Mark.

We get "just the facts" about Jesus.

In fact, it seems like a lot of the facts are left out.

There's no story about the birth of Jesus in Mark.

Instead, Mark begins with a very brief description of the ministry of John the Baptist.

There's a record of Jesus' baptism and temptation.

But, again, unlike the other gospels, there's no detail.

Those two important events are given five verses total.

Last week we read Mark's account of Jesus' rejection in Nazareth.

When you get a chance compare Mark's account with the account of that rejection in Luke.

Once again you'll find that Luke's account is filled with much more detail.

Unlike the other gospels we don't even get a detailed account of the resurrection.

Mark ends his gospel with a note of uncertainty and fear in the middle of a sentence.

Mark is breathtakingly brief.

His favorite word is “immediately” and that’s how the gospel reads.

There are no wasted words in the book of Mark.

## THE EXCEPTION

But, today’s lesson is the exception to the rule.

For some reason Mark spends sixteen verses telling the story of John the Baptist’s death in gory detail. Why?

What’s so important about this story that Mark decides to switch from his Joe Friday, “just the facts” style to a style more akin to one of those made for TV series?

In this story everyone behaves badly except the one whose head ends up on a platter.

If HBO needs an idea for it’s next project, here it is!

But, if we believe that every word in Mark’s gospel is there for a reason, then this is not just another tale about power and abuse. It’s not just another horror story.

This tragic tale is an important part of a greater message.

John prepares the way for Jesus, not only with his life but also with his death.

You see, this story is not just about John.

It’s also about Jesus and what comes next in the gospel story.

It foreshadows events to come.

## “EASY” MINISTRY

Last week we talked about Jesus sending his disciples out to preach and heal.

He told them to travel light.

No money.  
No bread.  
No nothing.

Just the clothes on their back and a message.  
“Repent. The kingdom of God is at hand.”

Jesus did give them one thing though, authority,  
authority over the “unclean spirits”.

And as it turns out, that’s all they really needed.

They went two by two to many villages and the results were incredible.

The message was preached.  
The sick were healed.  
Demons were cast out.

Sometimes ministry seems easy.  
We to preach the gospel,  
and things change.

People repent.  
Our prayers for the sick are answered.  
Demons are cast out.

I wonder if the disciples thought that it would always be that easy?

After all, Jesus was the Messiah.  
Surely He would lead them triumphant into Jerusalem?

We see their hopes on display in the so called triumphal entry into  
Jerusalem.  
But, we know the rest of the story.  
We know that the hopes of Palm Sunday will be dashed on Good Friday.

## DIFFICULT MINISTRY

You see, following Jesus is not always easy.  
Sometimes our attempts to preach the gospel are rejected.

Sometimes folks don't want to repent.  
They like things the way they are.

We pray fervently for the sick but healing doesn't happen. And on every front it looks like the demons are winning.

That's how it will be pretty soon for Jesus and his disciples.

And that's how it is now for John and his disciples.

John the Baptist prepared the way for the Messiah.  
He prepared the way by calling people to repent and be baptized.

But, he also prepared the way by his death.

His confrontation with the political and religious powers does not end well.

They will have his head on a platter.

If the disciples thought that all ministry would be as easy as their first mission trip,  
John the Baptist's story makes them think again.

Jesus will soon start talking about taking up a cross.

The disciples might act like they don't understand.  
But, in their hearts they know all too well what he's talking about.

The story of John makes it clear.  
Ministry can be a very risky business indeed.

Sometimes, like those first disciples,  
we act like ministry is a parade that leads to power.

The death of John reminds us that there's more to the story.

You can't tell the Christian story without mentioning the cross.

HEROD'S AMBIVALENCE

There's an interesting detail in our lesson for today.  
Even those in power recognized that John was someone special.

Look at how Herod is portrayed in this passage.  
The Bible tells us that Herod is afraid of John.  
Herod acknowledges that John is a just and holy man.

Even when John condemned Herod for taking his brother's wife in marriage, Herod tried to protect John.

Herod didn't understand John,  
but despite that he liked to listen to him.

There was something about John's integrity and preaching that made a difference.  
Even crazy Herod took notice and listened.

## PILATE

It sort of reminds me of how Pilate is portrayed in the gospel of John.

Pilate realizes that Jesus is an innocent man.  
He tries to find a way to let Jesus go.

But, the religious and political powers won't let it happen.

They say, "We have no king but Caesar."

The threat in that message is clear.  
If Pilate lets Jesus go, he's going to be in trouble with Rome.

So, Pilate washes his hands of the whole affair  
and gives in the wishes of those who want to do Jesus harm.

He crucifies him.

## THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE

John's death follows the same trajectory.

Herodias and her daughter have King Herod dancing to their tune at the king's birthday party.

The daughter dances so well that the king promises her anything...up to half his kingdom!

But, when the daughter asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter, Herod was deeply grieved.

And yet...

he wasn't so grief stricken that he refused the request. He sent for the executioner...immediately.

He didn't want to look "weak" in front of his guests.

So the "king" who has no real power (the real power belonged to Rome) does what he doesn't want to do so he won't look "weak". Right.

So, King Herod beheads John the Baptist, and John's disciples come and claim the body.

The moral of this story is clear.

Divine work can have deadly consequences.

When you stand up to evil, evil can and does strike back.

Like Pilate and Herod, we often tempted to take the path of least resistance.

We are tempted to say nothing and do nothing because we don't want to create waves.

But, doing nothing is in itself an action.

And there are consequences for that action.

As Edmund Burke, a statesman once put it, "The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men [and women] to do nothing."

John refused to do nothing in the face of injustice.

He refused to wink at the immorality of the king.

That cost him his life.

But, it also prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah.

## RESURRECTION

Herod understood very well that this was not the end of the matter.

Herod feared John because he knew in his heart that John was a man of God.

And when he heard about Jesus and his disciples, preaching a message of repentance, healing the sick and driving out demons,

Herod said,  
“That’s John the Baptist, whom I beheaded.  
He’s been raised from the dead.”

I guess you could say that this was Herod’s conscience speaking, though from what I know of Herod, he didn’t have much of a conscience.

So, I suggest we look at Herod’s statement in another way.  
Maybe this is also an example of prophecy by an unwilling prophet.

John’s death also foreshadowed the resurrection.  
God’s work continued in Jesus and his disciples despite the death of John.  
It was as if John had been raised from the dead.

You couldn’t kill John because the Kingdom of God was still coming.

The kingdom came in John the Baptist, in Jesus and the disciples, ...and all those who were empowered by the Spirit to continue his ministry after the resurrection...even to this day.

That’s what gives us the courage to speak truth to power.

We believe that the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus does not die.

It continues in works of love and justice done in his name.

The Spirit of the risen Christ continues to empower disciples to cast out demons,

heal the sick and preach good news to those who are falsely imprisoned.

What the Herods of our age say and do is irrelevant.

God's kingdom comes.

God's will is done.

And neither the executioner's axe nor a cross can keep that kingdom from coming.

## THE POWER OF LOVE

How can we believe that the kingdom is coming in the face of so much evidence to the contrary?

In our world, injustice runs rampant.

Politicians and religious leaders still exploit the very people whom they have been charged to protect.

The world is filled with "kings" that are just as crazy, just as immoral and just as opportunistic as old king Herod.

They will "chop off your head" in a New York minute if it suits their purposes.

So how can we pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"?

We can pray that because we believe in the power of love.

We believe the sacrificial love of God in Jesus Christ is stronger than the powers of darkness.

Last week we prayed for the safety of those little Thai boys and their coach trapped in a cave.

Thank God they all made it out in the nick of time.

The whole world put aside political and cultural differences in order to save these boys.

And as the story has come out, we've learned how sacrificial love made this miracle happen.

The coach gave his share of the meager food supply to the boys during the ten day ordeal.

And that meant he was one of the weakest when they were found by the British divers.

A doctor and three Thai Navy Seals stayed with the group the whole time after they were found.

And sadly, the doctor, who came from Australia, found out that his father had passed away while he was in the cave tending to the needs of the boys.

But, the greatest sacrifice was made by a former Thai Navy Seal, Saman Gunan.

He, like so many others, gladly put his life on the line for the boys.

Days before a video was made of him standing near the steps of an airplane and vowing to “bring the boys home”.

He died trying.

The BBC summed it up well,  
“He died so that they might live.”

This story teaches us two things:  
First, the value of life  
and second, how love and sacrifice can bring about salvation.

Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this:  
to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13)

The Bible tells us that just like those boys, we live in a world of darkness.

We can’t save ourselves.  
Help must come from the outside.

Someone must be willing to sacrifice their life in order to save us.

Just as those divers risked the dangers of rising water and great darkness,

so Jesus the son of God came into our dark and dangerous world to save us from our sins.

Sadly, he was killed on a cross  
by the very people he came to save.

Don't think that the culpability for Jesus' death was limited to those who crucified him long ago.  
The Bible tells us that we're all a part of this story.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans that "while we were still sinners Christ died for us".

But, the sacrifice was not made in vain.  
The story does not end in darkness.  
The story ends with resurrection.

The story ends with salvation...  
...and we are given a chance to live a new life filled with gratitude for the one who saved us.

CNN writer Jan Parini wrote,  
"And everyone is beholden to Saman Gunan, the Thai diver who lost his life a few days ago while making his way out" of the of cave.

Those boys and their coach who were saved from the darkness will remember that name for the rest of lives. Their lives will change forever because of what that diver did for them.

And that's how it is for us when it comes to Christ.  
Christ died for us

...not so we could live for ourselves...  
but so that we could live for others  
in the name of the one who died for us.  
(2 Corinthians 5:15)

John's story prepares the way for salvation.  
His death foreshadows a greater salvation.  
The sacrifice is not in vain.

The story continues in the lives of Jesus and his disciples.

A light shines in the deepest darkness.  
And it will not be quenched.

Amen.