

“Real World Religion”
Psalm 24; Mark 6:14-29
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She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.” Mark 6:24

What in the world is such a sad, violent story like this doing in the Bible? Actually, the Bible is full of stories that expose the dark side of things, but seldom do we dwell on them. Sometimes in the summer, when the church pews are thinly populated, preachers give into the temptation to roll out a sermon series with titles like “Terrible Texts” or “Stories I Bet You Didn’t Even Know Were in the Bible.” Trust me. I’m not going to do a whole series on these kinds of things.

The Lutheran Handbook is a tongue-in-cheek approach to all things Lutheran and attempt to get people interested in faith matters and in the Bible. It has a chapter entitled “The Five Grossest Stories in the Bible,” none of which I will share with you today, other than to say the one of the subtitles of that chapter is “The Naked Prophet,” and another is “The Almost Naked Prophet,” the latter having to do with the time Jeremiah buried his underclothes in wet river sand, dug them up, and put them back on again. I’ll spare you how the rest of the story goes.

There are many problematic passages throughout the Bible. In II Samuel, the story is told of a well-meaning man who reaches out his hand to steady the Ark of the Covenant. And is struck dead on the spot. Job suffers indescribable miseries. Absalom, son of David the king, while riding on a horse, gets caught in the branches of the tree, and his father’s enemies come and stab him in the heart. There are other stories like this in scripture.

I want to go back to the original question: Why is the story of the beheading of John the Baptist in the Bible, and more specifically, in a book that goes by the name “Gospel”? The word “gospel” means “good news,” and yet, you can put your ear to the ground, listen as hard as you can, and not hear a single note of good news in the vicinity. (1) Jesus does not appear in the story. God is not mentioned.

The plot revolves around two men and two women. The men are John the Baptist and Herod Antipas. John, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, was the forerunner of Jesus. He was one who baptized Jesus. He was a prophet who made no special claim for himself, but told everyone in shouting distance to repent and be baptized and to get ready for the one who would come after him. “I will not even be worthy to stoop down and untie his sandals. All I have to offer is water for baptism, but he will have Holy Spirit.” John’s natural humility notwithstanding, he was quite a character, famous for saying whatever

was true, whether people wanted to hear it or not. He was memorable in that he always wore a hide of camel's hair which was held in place by a leather belt (a factor that disqualifies him from the naked prophet contest). He ate locusts and wild honey. He was quite a topic of conversation around Jerusalem and the Judean countryside. That's John the Baptist.

The other male character in the story is Herod Antipas, tetrarch or regional governor of Galilee during the Roman Empire, from the 4th century A.D. to 40 A.D. He was the son of the more familiar Herod the Great, who was frightened out of his wits when the Magi showed up at the palace asking about the holy child and ordered the murder of every male child in the district. You could accurately say that the son inherited a problematic gene pool, but it is also true that Herod, Jr. was a frightened, suspicious man in own right. It didn't matter how swanky his throne was, he was worried that someone might become more influential than he was, that someone might get ahead of him. In today's story, he is a grown man, afraid of ghosts. That is Herod.

The female characters are a woman named Herodias and a woman named Herodias. Herodias I, I will call her, is the current wife of Herod the governor. She was formerly married to Herod's brother, Philip. The other Herodias is Herod's niece/stepdaughter. Are you with me so far? I am not making any of this up. Thank goodness, Herodias II is known by another name. She was called Salome by the Jewish historian, Josephus, and that's what we are going to call her too. Actually, in Bible school in Mississippi, we called her Salome, rhyming with "baloney," but actually, the way you say it is "bologna," but we won't even go there. We are going to call her Salome this morning.

Here is what happened: John the Baptist, who, as I said, had no problem speaking truth to power, went to Herod and told him that his marriage his brother's former wife was a moral outrage because Herod had broken up the brother's marriage in order to take Herodias as his bride. The king naturally didn't like hearing that message, but he also realized that John was a righteous, holy man; and, believe it or not, he was usually interested in what John had to say, so instead of arresting him and executing him, he arrested him in the sense of having him taken into protective custody. The bride, Herodias, was much less happy about John the Baptist. She was infuriated that she had been talked about in such a way, and she waited for an opportunity to get her revenge.

It came to pass when Herod threw a birthday party. The entertainment of the evening was provided by the family lotus blossom, the young and graceful Salome, a.k.a. Herodias II. She danced so beautifully that Herod told her she could have anything she wanted, even if it was half the kingdom. (One can only imagine how many goblets of wine the Governor had consumed before he came to the point of saying, "I will give half my power away.") When Salome consulted her mother, Herodias seized her opportunity, "You should ask for the head of John, and so Salome did, adding her own personal touch of the platter. Herod did not want to grant the request, but he was afraid of losing face before his relatives, and before the VIP guests who had heard him make his foolish offer and so it all came to pass as Salome had requested. After it was over, what was left of John was claimed by his disciples and lain in a tomb.

Is your ear still to the ground? Can you begin to hear echoes of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ? How it was that before he was killed in a spectacularly undignified way, Jesus had spoken truth to power? When Jesus had appeared on the scene, it was John who announced his coming. After John was dead, the king thought John had been raised from the dead. That was not so, because Jesus was the one who would defeat death, but it turns out that no beheading, no crucifixion can stop the kingdom of God come near in Christ Jesus.

This story, as sad and challenging as it is, was told for the encouragement of the church as it tried to live out its faith in the real world. Just as John's death foreshadows Jesus' death, John's death also reminds the disciples of Jesus that regardless of how things appear on the surface, even when the signs of success are all around, as they were after the disciples' first missionary journey, if you do your job right as a follower of Christ, as a servant of Almighty God, there will be shadows. It will not be easy. For Christ's kingdom to come, the kingdoms of this world have to be defeated, and in order for the kingdoms of this world to get out of the way, the forces of worldly power must relinquish their positions, and they never do it gladly. Many of the earliest readers of the gospel would themselves be imprisoned and die, in many instances, terrible deaths for the sake of the gospel.

In a time like ours when being Christian is seen by many as the path to success and prosperity, it is important to remember the scandal of the cross. It is important to remember that anyone who wants to follow Christ, to speak for him, to serve him must be in the business of disturbing the comfortable as well as comforting the disturbed. Dietrich Bonhoeffer the great German theologian, who himself was executed later by the Nazis for participating in a plot against Hitler, wrote of the cost of discipleship and the difference between cheap grace and costly grace: "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring change or repentance. . . cheap grace is grace without the cross. . . . While costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field, for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. Costly grace is costly because it cost God the life of God's own son: 'you were bought at a price,' and what has cost God so much cannot be cheap for us." (2)

You and I are a long way from literally having to give up our lives for the sake of Christ, and yet, surely, there is something to learn here about how to live in the world and yet not be of the world, something about operating according to a different set of values, something to hear about something other than being comfortable as the goal of one's life. Jesus said, "If you wish to become my disciples, then deny yourselves and take up your cross and follow me." To be a disciple is not to be full of **yourself**, but to be full of trust that Christ's kingdom really is the one lasting true thing. To be a disciple is to be convinced that there is nothing more profoundly beautiful or meaningful in life, even joyful in the oddest sense, than to be willing to give up everything for something that is more important and more lasting than yourself.

I don't think we are called to go out of our way to ask for trouble; in fact as a pastor, I spend a good bit of time trying to help people avoid putting on a Messiah complex. I tell them that the role of Savior is already taken. But that is a different thing from making the brave, costly choices that true discipleship inevitably entails. In a moment, we are going to say *The Apostles' Creed*. Did you know that the only "word that describes the earthly life of Jesus is the word "suffer"? "He suffered under Pontius Pilate."

What might making a costly choice look like for us?

A young person says no to doing what everyone else is doing, because she realizes it will compromise her human dignity. She will pay the price of no longer being in the crowd.

A congregation decides to step in faith and speak up for the excluded. There is a cost for that.

A college graduate decides to take a couple of years to work among undocumented migrant workers rather than going straight into the MBA program.

You and I make choices everyday about whether we will live our lives successfully or significantly.

Sue Monk Kidd begins her book, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* with this sentence: "The truth will set you free, but first it will shatter the safe, sweet way you live."

The story of John the Baptist story has a lot to teach us about living in the real world. As Salome dances before the king, we remember that a person can be beautiful on the outside and not so great on the inside.

We read the story, and remember that the shadows are real. We realize that evil can flourish in any human heart, and it almost always arises out of wounded pride. If you ever feel yourself righteously full of wounded pride, then you had better treat it as if it was a snake bite, and deal with it radically and quickly, or it will poison you and cause you to do things you don't want to do.

I think about the election that is immediately before us and the public servants who are running for office in Georgia this year. I think about how you and I, the voters, need to watch any tendency on the part of anyone who is in public office to do the expedient things and to try to please all of the people, all of the time. Let us remind our political leaders that they and we are always answerable to a higher power. I think of something that Desmond Tutu said to the South African Minister of Law and Order, who was responsible for enforcing unjust and unfair laws: "Mister Minister, I remind you that you are not God. One day your name will be a faint scribble on the pages of history while the name of Jesus Christ will live forever of his kingdom there will be no end." Nothing can stop the kingdom of God and the mission of Christ.

I bet not a single one of you has ever given Herod Antipas a single thought, but I love it that today we have gathered to give thanks for the brave and faithful life of John the Baptizer and to rejoice that there is no power on earth that can silence the good news. As Dr. King once said, “Unarmed truth and unconditional love **will** carry the day.” Thanks be to God.

(1) Much of this sermon is taken from my chapter in *Living by the Word*, Debra Bendis, ED., Chalice Press, 2005.

(2) As quoted in *The Cost of Moral Leadership*, Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson. William B, Eerdmans, 2003.