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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 10 (Pentecost 8), Series B
Saturday, July 14th, 2018
Sunday, July 15th, 2018

Sermon: In Life *and* Death: Jesus

Texts: Mark 6:14-29

Focus Statement: Even in the midst of suffering and persecution, we hope in Christ's resurrection.

Function Statement: That they would take courage in our anti-Christian culture.

Sermon Structure: Story-Interrupted

Doctrinal Locus: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and God's Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it" (SC, Third Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. There is absolutely no Gospel, no Good News, in today's gospel reading. Look for it again and again, and you will not find out. In fact, despite the loose translation in the ESV, there is only an oblique reference to Jesus when Mark mentions "his name" (Greek: *to onoma autou* [Mark 6:14]). Today's reading about the death of John the Baptist is probably one of the saddest stories in all of the Bible. There's no Jesus, no forgiveness, and—so it would seem—no hope.

Our pericope begins with "King" Herod getting word of the apostles' healing ministry in Galilee (Mark 6:12-13). The word on the street is that the apostles' teacher, Jesus, must be either Elijah or one of the prophets. But when Herod hears it, his guilty conscience dredges up a most dreadful conclusion: "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised" (Mark 6:16, ESV).¹

John the Baptist was a prophet sent by God and the forerunner of Jesus Christ. John, who also happened to be Jesus' second cousin, preached "a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). It was a simple message that cut deeply. With his camel's skin tunic and

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

locust legs stuck between his teeth, John attracted a lot of attention. Yet he always saw his purpose to point people to Jesus. “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:7-8). And when Jesus came to be baptized by John, he boldly declared, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

John the Baptist didn’t have a big ego. He always knew his job was to prepare the way for Jesus and to pass the baton to the true Messiah. In fact, when Jesus came to be baptized, John hesitated and said, “I need to be baptized by *you*, and do you come to me?!” (Matt. 3:14). Then, when his jealous disciples reported to him about Jesus’ growing popularity, John humbly replied, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). (Would that all preachers and prophets had this same attitude!)

Yet of all the people who came to hear John the Baptist, none was probably more famous (or infamous) than Herod Antipas, one of the surviving sons of King Herod the Great, referred to as “King Herod” in our Gospel. But in fact, “King” Herod Antipas was not a king at all. He was a tetrarch, the ruler of one quarter section of the Roman province of Judea. He was more like a county commissioner than an actual king, for the territory he governed was just a smidgeon of his father’s former kingdom. And several years later, when he journeyed to Rome to petition the Emperor for the title of king (bestowed on his half-brother Philip, another tetrarch), he was deposed instead of promoted and exiled to Gaul, of all places, which is modern-day France!

Antipas always had his eyes fixed on bigger and better things, not only crowns and titles, but even his brother’s wife. Antipas divorced his first wife so that he could steal his half-brother’s wife, Herodias. This was a big no-no under Jewish law. In fact, it amounted to incest

(Lev. 18:16; Lev. 20:21). But Antipas could not resist Herodias's feminine wiles. He even lost a war against his former father-in-law just to hold onto her hand in marriage.

So when the man-who-would-be-king came to hear John's preaching, the wilderness prophet didn't mince words in order to curry favor or flatter the uppity Antipas. Instead, he called the little king to account. "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife" (Mark 6:18). He urged him to repent and turn away from his sin so he could be saved. John the Baptist was a man of tremendous courage and conviction. It's never easy to speak truth to power, as St. Paul, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and other Christian martyrs discovered through the centuries. Whether your critique is of an emperor, king, prime minister—or president—politicians don't like to be publicly embarrassed or have their errors pointed out. Throughout Israel's history, the prophets served as the conscience of the kings. And, more often than not, they paid for their preaching with their lives. Isaiah was sawed in half. Jeremiah was thrown down a well. And John the Baptist was thrown into prison.

Herodias had a grudge against John for criticizing her divorce and marriage to her brother-in-law. The Greek literally means she "had it in for him" (Mark 6:19). She wanted Herod to execute him and so shut him up once and for all. But Herod knew that John was a holy man. He worried what the crowds would do if he killed him. And besides all that, he found his preaching entertaining. Antipas was like one of those people today who consider themselves "spiritual, but not religious." They like to dabble a bit in the Bible and try out various spiritual practices. They probably watch a little bit of Oprah or Joel Osteen on Sunday morning. But they never actually allow the Word to convict them and change their hearts. They might enjoy "spiritual" conversations and be entertained by certain preachers, but they don't actually believe the Truth of God's Word.

From the other Gospels, we know that John became discouraged in prison. He even began to second-guess himself about Jesus and wonder if he'd made a mistake. He sent messengers to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Matt. 11:3). Jesus sent back words of encouragement and assurance that, indeed, he was Israel's long-prophesied, true Messiah. And all the while John rotted away in his jail cell.

Until "an opportunity came" (Mark 6:21). On Herod Antipas's birthday, he decided to throw a big bash. (By the way, this was unusual because birthday celebrations were a pagan practice that was uncommon among the Jews). Herod invited all the most important citizens in Galilee, and when the guests were good and drunk, Herodias' daughter came in and danced for them. While unnamed in Mark's Gospel, we know from the ancient historian Josephus that she was called Salome.

According to Mark, the girl's dancing "pleased" Herod. We don't know exactly in what way she "pleased" him. After all, she was Herod's stepdaughter and niece (and later his sister-in-law!). Numerous stage and film depictions portray Salome as a nubile nymph trying to seduce her stepfather/uncle. Yet the New Testament does not state explicitly that Salome's dancing was erotic or suggestive in any way. We cannot assume that Salome filled Antipas with some kind of incestuous lust (although, that would all be par for the course in that family). And, as another preacher points out, "I don't think it was the Chicken Dance."² The fact that Antipas's wife Herodias wasn't even in the room may indicate something sordid was going on.

Both drink and the girl's dancing went to Herod's head, and little Antipas impressed his guests by a bold declaration. "Whatever you ask me," he told Salome, "I will give you, up to half of my kingdom" (Mark 6:23). Hah! His "kingdom," such as it was!

² <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2012/07/sermon-on-salome-herod-and-the-beheading-of-john-the-baptist/>

This was quite a promise, and the girl didn't want to waste her wish on the wrong thing. So she immediately asked her mom's advice. Without skipping a beat, Herodias smiled that diabolical smile and said, "The head of John the Baptist."

Satisfied with her mother's ribald request, Salome returned and said, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

Mark tells us that when he heard it, Antipas "was exceedingly sorry." His heart probably fell into his stomach, and he sobered up really fast. Again, he was worried about a riot if he killed John (Matt. 14:5; 21:26). He probably also suffered a bit of a superstitious fear of the holy prophet (cf. 6:20).

But Herod also couldn't risk ticking off his wife or breaking his promise to Salome in front of all his guests. Who would ever trust him if he couldn't keep his word to his own family? Antipas was caught in a pickle. He was "exceedingly sorry." St. Paul writes that godly sorrow produces repentance, but worldly sorrow leads to death (2 Cor. 7:10). Remorse and repentance are *not* the same thing. Herod was experiencing *worldly* sorrow. He was sorry that he was caught in his sin, not sorry for the rift in his relationship with God. He didn't listen to John the Baptist. He didn't repent. And so now he was in the middle of a Catch 22, damned if he did, and damned if he didn't. Either way, he would end up in damnation.

So the wannabe king caved in to the whim of a dancing girl. His reputation was more important than his righteousness. Or, as Luther puts it, "'Beware, lords are lords, and always seek their own interests above those of other people.'"³

He *immediately* sent an executioner to chop off the prophet's head and bring it back on a silver serving tray. John gave his life for the Gospel and died as the first Christian martyr.

³ Martin Luther, "The Day of St. John the Baptist: Third Sermon," in *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, vol. 3, ed. Eugene F.A. Klug, trans. Klug *et al* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 336.

No doubt, that night Herodias slept better than she had in weeks. Herod probably never got a good night's sleep ever again. John's disciples came and took John's body and gave him a proper burial (presumably without the head). And that was the end of John the Baptist, the greatest prophet the world has ever seen, the man of whom Jesus declared, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist" (Matt. 11:11a). High praise indeed, coming from the lips of the Son of God!

But what are we to make of this sad, sad story? What lessons do we learn? Don't let your passions and lust get the better of you? Don't make promises that are too painful to keep? Pay attention to the preacher's sermon and repent for real? If we want to find a moral in the story, any of those might do. Or maybe the lesson is that, if you don't want to lose your head, keep quiet and keep your head down instead of ticking off the wrong people. No, that's not it at all. John the Baptist was bold and daring, but he wasn't a fool. He knew the cost of telling an inconvenient truth. But he also knew that it was better to lose his life than to forfeit his soul.

Then what *is* our takeaway from this Gospel lesson? It's hard to see at first, but I think the point of this story is the same thing as the point of John the Baptist's entire ministry: to point people to Jesus. John said that he must decrease, and Jesus must increase. He pointed his finger at Christ and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" He preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins because *Jesus* was coming to forgive those very sins. Jesus came to die *for* those sins—and us sinners—because the only way to take them away was to nail them to the cross.

John died because he contended for the truth. And his disciples laid him in a tomb. Jesus also died because he spoke the truth. In fact, he *is* "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

Silly people like Herod Antipas want Jesus to put on a show. And cynics like the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, ask, “What *is* truth?” We, in our times of trial, are tempted to ask Jesus, “*Are* you really the Savior who was to come, or should we look for someone else?” Yet Jesus died for us all, shedding his blood to save us from our sins and ourselves. For just like the so-called “King” Herod, we are all trapped in our own stories, caught in a Catch 22, damned if we do and damned if we don’t, condemned for the things we have done and for the things we have left *undone*. We are all dead in our sin until Christ sets us free and makes us alive!

John the Baptist is a type of Christ. He points people to Jesus, not only by his message and life, but also by his death. For just as John’s disciples took his body and laid him in a tomb, so also Jesus’ disciples (Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus) took his body and laid it in a borrowed tomb. Only, Jesus didn’t need it for long. Three days later, he rose again from the dead! And now he gives eternal life to all who believe in his name. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). But the Lamb who was slain has begun his new reign. Unlike Herod Antipas, he is a real king—the King of kings and Lord of lords. And unlike all earthly rulers who, ultimately, act in their own interests, Jesus puts his love into action for you. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.