

Mark 6:14-29 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Death of John the Baptist

¹⁴King Herod heard of it, for Jesus'^[a] name had become known. Some were^[b] saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." ¹⁵But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

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

Psalm 24

- ¹The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
- ²for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.
- ³Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
- ⁴Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
- ⁵They will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.
- ⁶Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.^[a] *Selah*
- ⁷Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
- ⁸Who is the King of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle.
- ⁹Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
- ¹⁰Who is this King of glory?
The LORD of hosts,
he is the King of glory. *Selah*

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Psalm 24, Mark 6:14-29

“Sex, Politics, and Violence: A Holy Man Loses His Head”

Kerra Becker English

My Interpreter’s Study Bible says in the notes on this passage, “The almost whimsical nature of the events that lead to John’s gruesome beheading portrays a level of evil that is chilling in its pervasiveness.” I’d say yes, that’s true. Evil on top of evil is exactly what’s happening in this story, and the one power player who could do something about it, the one who seems to even care what the holy man, John, is saying is the one that follows through on his daughter’s strange request for John’s head so he won’t “lose face” in front of his friends.

This one is Herod Antipas, the son of the other Herod, the King of Judea that massacred all the boy children after the wise men told him about following a star to witness the birth of Jesus. This powerful family understood violence. They lived by it. You don’t cross the King, or critique his family – that is - not without consequences.

John had been speaking out about Herod’s affairs, or at least this one particular affair. He married his brother’s wife, or as the historian Josephus recorded, he married his brother Philip’s mother-in-law. As some religious figures are quick to do, John the Baptist called him out. Today still, we are fascinated by how politicians and celebrities choose their amorous adventures. The “rules” we often live by don’t seem to apply to them. Maybe it gives us a measure on our own morality to point out the immorality of note in the lives of public figures. Donald Trump’s multiple divorces from and marriage to his trophy wives... Virginia Delegate Joe Morrissey’s scandalous affair with his young secretary... Or go back in our longer history to note our

fascination with Thomas Jefferson's descendants of a slave woman living on his plantation. This is not a new phenomenon. We get sucked into these stories with great interest. That could never happen to us! It takes power to cause scandal like that or at least the 15 minutes of fame of being messed up enough to be a guest on the Jerry Springer show.

These sexual conquests and violent tendencies seem to pair up together with some frequency. The question is, so what will we - as Christians who claim to live by a different standard - do about it? Is there anything we can do about it? I don't see John the Baptist quite as some religious radio talk show host spewing forth negativity about any situation that will bump up the ratings. The reason I don't is that Herod was actually listening to him. He heard something in what John said that was convicting him, converting him, and changing his outlook. Herod has John in protective custody from those who might want him dead - most notably this wife in question. He had listened to John preach and was perplexed by what he was hearing. He was moved. He had absolutely no intention of harming this holy man, that is, until...

...Until he made a really, really stupid promise to his daughter Herodias, also known as Salome by some accounts. A parent really should not be made to feel responsible for promising "anything you want dear" to a teenage daughter after her dance recital. Yet, Herod felt like he couldn't back down from his oath, even as his wife and daughter tricked him into giving something he really didn't want to give. The last thing he wanted was to have the blood of this religious man on his hands. It was yet another mark against his whole family as they turned, and turned, and turned again from God. Almost more "MacBeth" than "MacBeth," his family is tainted with the blood of not just the innocent, but of God's chosen. No wonder he believes that Jesus is John come back from the dead to haunt his every move.

I don't know how it's done. Changing the trajectory of such an awful family inheritance must be nearly impossible. We know this to be true from just about any even remotely decent psychological study. The sins of the parents are passed on to the children. Abusers learn to abuse from their abusive parents. Powerful families hold onto their power by any means necessary – even if it's illegal, or immoral, or causes the deaths of innocent people. We tend to call them terrorist groups when they use public scare tactics to demonstrate the capacity of their violence. It could only be a terrible kind of enemy who would use beheadings, and suicide bombs, and shameful humiliation to not just eliminate an enemy but to set a fearful example for anyone else who might follow in their footsteps.

This story sounds archaic, like something that wouldn't happen today, and yet it does. Beheadings are making a comeback thanks to the capability of internet videos to let them be shown around the world. Powerful families hold on to their financial and political power by any means necessary – flaunting corporate health and safety regulations, paying employees less than living wages, hiring overseas at a fraction of the cost, cutting corners that pollute the environment. The United States has the largest, most powerful military in the world. That in and of itself is a scare tactic that other nations fear. We think we know evil. We can point our fingers at it. And yet evil resides quite pleasantly within us as well. We're very good at looking the other way, and not calling it out. What? We wouldn't want to lose our heads, now would we?

I realize that we live in a complicated world. And I realize that fighting against the Herods, and the Pilates, and the drug cartels, and the terrorist organizations, and the unethical corporate power brokers, and the military machine is pretty darn hopeless. Sometimes we can't even get a handle on the abuse that is happening right in our own neighborhoods. There are violent outbursts, and sexual misdeeds, and political string-pulling going on way too close to

home, let alone if we put this on the national or international radar screen. We have become desensitized to it all. It's not uncommon for me to hear gunshots coming from my own living room – thanks to the television and video games.

It makes me really wonder what John was saying and preaching that caught Herod's attention. I would like to know what raised Herodias' ire so much that she could get her daughter to ask for his head presented on a platter. What kind of knowledge, what kind of wisdom makes that much of a difference? Could we, should we convince the world to change? Are we being led to speak real truth to the very, very powerful in our world today?

Sometimes I really do wish I knew the answers to those questions. But most days, I'm glad I don't. There have been preachers, teachers, and gospel truth-tellers throughout the centuries that were martyrs for the message. They told the truth and lost their heads, or were thrown to lions, or shot on the balcony of their hotel rooms. I hope that's not quite how I've been called to lead. I stand on that edge and look over, but I hope never to be asked to jump. That said, I do think it is our duty, as Christians, to assess the evil that lurks within us. How is it that we've become so cold to the tragedies of the world? We can't look too close, because we might be tugged by our own ethical shirt sleeve to do something, anything. We are hesitant to speak, or act, or trouble those waters. At least I know I am. This is about as bold as you're going to get from me – me asking a few questions on Sunday morning that may get lost some time after lunch and a nap Sunday afternoon.

I hate that. I'd like to be a rallyer of sorts – maybe. Stories like this one challenge me to ask the really deep and tough question, “What kind of Christian am I?” Do I live my faith in such a way as to be a holy woman who might not be the best friend of the ones who do bad things and

then shrug them off as a necessity of the world? I want my faith and my ethics to line up, and I think most of the time they do, but I know there are plenty of times where convenience and complacency win the day. I like my pleasant life with my head attached – thank you very much. Help me, Lord. Help me be a true witness, a real slayer of evil. Help me continue to believe that there's hope for a different kind of future. Help me to lead with authority, AND with humility knowing that I don't have all the answers. Help me speak truth to power, and love to the powerless. That's what Jesus would do, and I really do hope to grow in his likeness. That's all any of us can hope to do. Amen.