

Rev. Sharon Smith

Mark 6: 14-29

July 15th, 2018

Objectives:

- To broaden the way that we read and interpret Gospel narratives;
 - To invite us to consider repentance (re-thinking, change of heart) to a new way of listening and responding to the Spirit who leads us away from power/status toward self-emptying; and
 - To explore the ways we, as the community of Saint Catherine's, continue to live into and out of the lure of Christendom.
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“Glory to God”

“**Source of all being**”

“**Life giving One**”

As a follower of this way of Christ, I am growing in my ability to tune into things that support life, each life, all life.

I woke up really early last Tuesday morning. Stumbled out of bed. Lit a candle and sat down with my Rooibos Tea to pray.

Desiring to tune my spirit into the comforting waves of the Life-giving stillness of God.

I desired a sense of security and peace.

“Open my mouth, I prayed, that my lips may proclaim your praise....”

And then, as is my custom I cracked open a Bible, to read the gospel for the following Sunday – today's Gospel.

And, let me tell you, it wasn't praise that came out of my mouth.

What the ... heck!

A little censored for sermon purposes!

This story of Herod and John the Baptist did not at first, tune me into the life-giving,

Source of all Being.

That desired sense of comfort, security and peace was replaced with a feeling of discomfort.

It unsettled, disturbed and even confused me.

This is a story, a parody perhaps, that has confused and amused many.

It has even inspired playwrights and made for an excellent opera

– anyone seen 'Silome' by Richard Strauss?

Amused or not. This text has not left me alone all week.

I have been wondering why Mark sought to describe this disturbing story in such vivid detail?

And place it in his Gospel? A Gospel – a Good News text? Where is the Good News in this?

There are other accounts of the death of John the Baptist, from 1st century Historians that are less epic.

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Josephus writes:

“Herod decided, therefore, that it would be much better to strike first and be rid of the [Eloquent John the Baptist] before his work led to an uprising.”

- Nothing of John slamming Herod’s marriage,
- no hoity-toity banquet to win favour with government, military and wealthy Galileans;
- no young girl dancing provocatively,
- no thoughtless oath,
- no face saving maneuvers,
- and no head on a platter.

So, what was Mark’s intent, in writing *this* story,
in *this* way
and placing it in his *Gospel* account?
And why *here*?

Last week we left off, where the disciples had been appointed by Jesus to go out to all the villages, two by two, and their experience was one of great success.
Many are healed, **many** are delivered from evil spirits.

If you skip over today’s Gospel reading and jump to Mark ch 6 vs 30.
The story line would work just fine ...
The apostles gather around Jesus and report to him all they had done.
Makes perfect sense. From experience to reporting to Jesus.
Nothing lost?

Or is there more to it?

My understanding of Mark’s gospel is that he wrote with intention.

As 21st century Bible readers, we would do well to read these sacred scriptures as literature, written from a particular historical perspective that is rich in theology.

A careful look at the words Mark uses, the style or genre of the story AND
with much gratitude to Ched Myers’ historical work “Binding the Strong Man” –
**we can indeed find Good News in this story,
even a source of Life for us, our neighbours, and for our earth.**

Let’s get into the story.

John the Baptist’s primary theme in his preaching was ‘repentance’.
Calling people to re-think, to change their minds, their hearts, and their lifestyles.
To align with the Justice, Kindness and Humility of God.

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So... John was arrested and brought into the courts of Herod junior.
The son of Herod the Great.

Now, the ethic in Herod junior's court had been influenced by his Father - Herod the Great:

- marriage vows were broken and made only for the sake of building political empires;
- success was defined by visible greatness – large buildings, wealth, fame and status; and
- Jewish Law was only practiced when it was politically convenient.

You see, Herod the Great had expanded the second temple in Jerusalem so that his dynasty would "have a capital city worthy of his dignity and grandeur and to gain more support from the Jewish Nation" (Binding the Strong Man, Ched Myers).
Self-serving interests.

I wonder if Herod the Great and his son, Herod Junior worshiped in their Jerusalem temple.
I wonder if they ever encountered that Life-giving Spirit as they prayed the Psalms?

Herod junior, the Herod in this gospel story, was encultured in the way of his father, Herod the Great.

And then he encounters John the Baptist.
A man with a prophetic imagination.

Remember...

John was able to open himself to the things of God and risk honesty

John had courage to speak up and call for a different perspective.

“Repent.”

Think differently. Change your mind, your heart, your lifestyle. Imagine another way.

And live it.

“Repent”

And something about this prophet, John the Baptist, intrigues Herod junior.

Mark writes:

“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.”

Perhaps something of John's words tuned Herod's heart to the whispers of the Spirit. Perhaps.

However, with all my wonderings, Mark creates an image of Herod junior, as one who appears to have everything valued by first century culture, and yet is empty of integrity, empty of values, empty of inner resource and empty even of power.

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The parody (or joke) of this story, is that even with the presence of all the governors of Judea, the Military and the Galilean upper class, it took a dancing young girl to ask for John's execution – the very one who was disarming the **power** of Herod.

Herod junior may have had authority, but he didn't have influence.

It is a story that asks us to reflect on power, status and success.

Just as the disciples were experiencing success in their ministry.

Mark's narrative turns to the death of John the Baptist's...

And we are called to question...

What is success for us?

What becomes of humans when we gain power and status?

And we are reminded, as disciples of Jesus, that the destiny of those who proclaim a new way is always the same.

Mark writes that this prophet John, just like Jesus, was arrested, bound, executed, buried in a tomb, with rumors of resurrection.

If we inherit the mission, we inherit the destiny.

Viola Desmond, a black Nova Scotian Canadian woman, sat in protest in a white-only section of a movie theater in 1946 and was convicted of a crime.

If we inherit the mission, we inherit the destiny.

In 1943, **Dr. Ludwig Guttmann**, a German Jewish doctor, established a Spinal Injuries Centre in England. He imagined a new life for war victims - wheel chairs, sports, work opportunities. For the first 6 years of his practice, he was ridiculed as a Jew, as a German and as a Doctor.

If we inherit the mission, we inherit the destiny.

In 1948, Dr. Guttmann courageously made plans for the first National Para-olympic games to start on the same day as the Summer Olympics in London.

In a heated conversation...

One neurosurgeon, afraid of losing his reputation, challenged Guttmann with these words:

“National implies the best... What are these people the best of?”

And Guttmann replied: “The best of men”.

And the Para-olympic games was born.

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The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of the One who is the Source of life, each life, all life, is about bringing:

- an ethic of kindness,
- justice,
- preserving the voice of those who are usually left out,
- reconciling differences.

And my friends, it always requires self-sacrifice.

Not the way of power but the way of self-emptying.

“Rather than seizing, hording and exercising power in the domineering ways of typical kings, Jesus was consistently empowering others.” (see Philippians chapter 2).

This is not the way of the Herodians but the way of John, Jesus and the prophets of old. An ancient way. A way of the Spirit.

Herod Junior and his Father Herod the Great, paint a picture of unrestricted human power that is dangerous. And may seem extreme to us as Christians.

But three decades ago being Christian and attending Church were cultural norms. Christendom was in full bloom.

We had overflowing churches, endless resources, bursting Sunday School programs, we were given voice at political gatherings.

We had power and status. It seems we were ‘successful’.

But in whose eyes?

The story of Herod, intentionally placed here in the Gospel of Mark, calls us to reflect on our measures of success.

Brian McLaren in his book called *The Great Spiritual Migration*, reminds us, that along with overflowing churches, our religion was fused with colonial projects.

We believed it was ok as followers of Jesus to take land, segregate people, oppress women and rape the environment.

Success?

Is this the church of the Herodians – expanded grand Temples, visible results.

Or of John the Baptist and Jesus.

Where the mission involves self-emptying.

This morning, I would like to invite us:

- to reflect on our dreams for the community of Saint Catherine’s.
- An overflowing church with limitless resource?
- Fame?

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- At what cost?
- At whose cost?
- Who will be left out?
- What important quiet ministry will be forgotten?

For when we quieten ourselves in prayer.

The Spirit tunes our hearts to Life, each life, all life

...not to power or status.

The same song sung by the prophets of old...

to do justice, to love kindness,

and to walk humbly with Our God (Micah 6:8)

Even if. Even if...

inheriting the mission, means we inherit the destiny.

Amen.