

8th Sunday after Pentecost B 14 July 2024

Mark 6:14-29

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and those reclining with him. And the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you.' And he swore to her, 'Whatever you might ask of me, I will give you, ...' [my translation]. Let's pray: ...

Some of you might be familiar with David Heller's delightful little book, *Dear God: Children's Letters to God*. It contains some lovely and insightful observations. For example:

- "Dear God, What do you do with families that don't have much faith? There's a family on the next block like that. I don't want to get them in trouble, so I can't say who. See you in church. Alexis (age 10)"
- "Dear God, Want to hear a joke? What is red, very long, and you hear it right before you go to sleep? Give up? A sermon. Your friend, Frank (age 11)"

Then there's this one: "Dear God, I have doubts about you sometimes. Sometimes I really believe. Like when I was four and I hurt my arm and you healed it up fast. But my question is, if you could do this why don't you stop all the bad in the world? Like war. Like diseases. Like famine. Like drugs. And there are problems in other people's neighbourhoods too. I'll try to believe more. Ian (age 10)"

Young Ian's question betrays the secret fear in all of our hearts – God, do you really care about us? And when we hear of John's gruesome demise in today's gospel, it's easy to believe that evil has the upper hand.

John the Baptist is a fascinating character. We hear about him before he's even born. His father, Zechariah, is a priest in the hill country of Judea, and his mother, Elizabeth, is also from a priestly family. They had prayed for years for a child. Then, after almost all hope was gone, the angel Gabriel meets Zechariah as he is offering incense in the sanctuary: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord" (Luke 1:13-15).

And great he was. A wild man dressed in camels' hair with a wide leather belt around his waist. A diet of locusts and wild honey. Unkempt hair, scruffy beard, and piercing, burning eyes. John called for repentance and righteous living before God. It was his voice that Isaiah spoke of when he said, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD" (Isaiah 40:3; Mark 1:3).

It would be nice to think that the world listened and obeyed John's call, but we know better. John the Baptist spoke out once too often. His preaching was bold enough to breach the palace walls, falling on the ears of a government that didn't want to hear, challenging a sinful king who refused to be confronted. Herod had him arrested.

What transpires is a near-eastern version of *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Try to keep up. This Herod isn't Herod the Great, the one who was king when Jesus was born; the one responsible for the massacre of the baby boys in Bethlehem. This man is Herod Antipas, one of Herod the Great's sons, who survived his father's paranoia. Herod the Daddy was insanely suspicious, and near the end of his life, became well-known for murdering his own offspring as well. (It's reported that even Caesar in Rome said it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son.) Herod Philip, Antipas' half-brother, also survived. Another half-brother was Aristobulus, whose daughter, Herodias, married Herod Philip. They, in turn, had a daughter, Salome. On a visit to Rome, Herod Antipas meets his brother Philip's wife, Herodias, daughter of Aristobulus, which means that Philip married his own niece. Herodias is a deceitful and ambitious woman who sees in Antipas a ticket to power and influence, so she shoots through and marries Antipas. All clear? Good!

Enter John the Baptist. Not one to mince words, he thunders against this incestuous relationship: "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." Herodias is enraged and wants John dead. But, as much as Herod wants to please his new wife, he wants to wash his hands of this whole miserable affair [sound familiar?], because he likes listening to this holy and righteous prophet.

Meanwhile, John's cousin, Jesus, is becoming well-known. His fame spreads with stories of incredible crowds and miraculous healings. Yet, John languishes in a dungeon. If Jesus is the promised Messiah, why doesn't he get his relative out of jail?

Sadly, Herodias gets her chance. A birthday bash for her husband. Picture the scene. All the toffs are at the palace. Plenty of wine, women and song. Daughter Salome dances. She pleases Herod and his guests. Herod says to her, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you."

Salome runs out of the room to find her mother. "What should I ask for?" And you know the rest. Have you ever made a promise you regretted? As the text says, "The king was deeply grieved", but he'd sworn a solemn oath. A promise is a promise.

Chalk up another victory for evil. There seem to be lots of those throughout history down to this present moment. Countless millions have suffered horribly, violently, and senselessly. In the name of religion, in the name of racial purity, in the name of greed or lust or anger; often for no reason at all. Just consider the appalling number of deaths linked to DV in our own country at the moment. It appears that evil is winning.

What can we say when evil wins? Maybe the answer is in the way Mark structures his gospel record. Mark's first reference to John's arrest is right at the beginning of the book [1:14]. Then we only hear about it again where it's recollected in today's lesson. The only reason the sordid details are added is because Herod is worried about what he's hearing about Jesus. Something powerful is happening and everyone is talking about it. Some are saying that Jesus is Elijah resurrected; others say he's a prophet. And some say John the baptiser has come back to life, which convinces Herod that his tormentor has returned.

Mark may well have inserted this story for precisely young Ian and you and I as well, when we see so much wrong with this world and start wondering about God. Are you there, God? Do you care, God?

In order to answer those questions, we need to ask a couple of other questions. First, whom is Mark's gospel all about Saints? Jesus, yes! Now, as Mark goes through Jesus' story, does he indicate any difficulties, any stumbling blocks, any apparent victories for the other side, any moments when it appears that evil wins? Certainly. Think about the conflicts with the establishment, the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion, the miserable death of Jesus. Is that the end of the story? No! It ends with the resurrection, and some dumbfounded disciples. Does evil finally win? No! Not now; not ever! Now, ask those questions again. Are you there, God? Do you care, God? More than we can ever understand.

While today's lesson is a repugnant story of the excesses of the rich and famous, it's surrounded by the ministry of Jesus. Mark's message is that nothing in this world, not even the palaces of the powerful, are beyond the reach and impact of the gospel.

Sure, there are times when, with young Ian, that we wonder about God. There *is* horrible evil in the world. There are evil people: sociopaths, murderers, warmongers, vicious abusers. There are evil moments when otherwise good people are drawn into nefarious affairs. There're evil systems in which we all participate – people going without food and shelter in a nation of abundance, people not getting medical care for lack of money. There're evils born of sheer stupidity, like the promise Herod made to Salome.

But the message of our faith says that evil doesn't have the last word. Herod doesn't win. Herodias doesn't win. Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Idi Amin and all the other evil despots don't win. EVIL DOES NOT WIN! EVIL CANNOT WIN! Against the tide of evil, we have witnessed in God's house today, Fletcher confirming his baptismal faith in the Risen Lord Jesus Christ. Along with Fletcher, we can all with joy in our hearts shout out that God's world does not end with either the whimper of a starving child or the blast of a nuclear bomb; it ends with the Lamb upon the throne and the victorious song of a massive choir singing words that we love: 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever' (Revelation 11:15); HALLELUJAH! AMEN!

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus, the lover and keeper of our souls. Amen.