

Weekly Reflection • Pentecost 7B, 2021 • Mark 6: 14-29

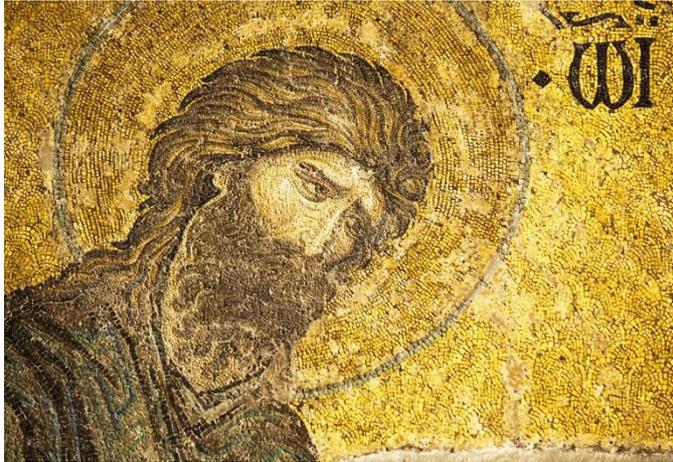
Greatly Perplexed

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When we study the Gospels, we usually focus on the people who embrace the good news of salvation through Jesus. ...

But what about the men and women in the New Testament who don't accept the good news?

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What about Herod, who in this week's lectionary finds himself "greatly perplexed" in the presence of John the Baptist, Jesus's forerunner? He's the man who likes to listen when John tells him the truth, who considers John a "righteous and holy man," who even dares to protect John from danger for a while — but in the end resists the transformative call of the gospel, and kills the one who bears him good news. What might we learn from a "failed"

follower like Herod?

I ask this question in part because the story of John the Baptist's death is a brutal one if we're looking for redemption. Consider what happens as Mark describes it: a faithless tetrarch forsakes his wife to marry his brother's. When a courageous truth-teller condemns the incestuous marriage, the truth-teller finds himself in "protective" custody — in a prison cell. Soon afterwards, the tetrarch throws himself a birthday party, gets drunk, and invites his stepdaughter to dance for his guests. Her performance pleases him so much that he promises her anything she desires. The girl (spurred on by her mother) demands the imprisoned prophet's death. Unwilling to lose face in front of his guests, the tetrarch keeps his promise and orders the truth-teller's execution. Before the birthday party is over, the girl receives the prophet's head on a platter.

Where is the good news in this story? Where is the hope? The healing? The joy? The salvation?

I know that we Christians are trained to slap all kinds of noble meanings on tragedy: "Nothing happens in this world unless God wills it." "God never gives anyone more than they can bear." "God's plans are always perfect, even when we don't understand them." But in terms of our lived experience, some sorrows — like those that surround John's death — still leave us reeling. They don't yield to our need for shape, sense, and closure.

So I wonder if the Gospel writer gives us this hard story for another reason. Not to reveal good news, but to show us what's at stake when the good news is rejected. Maybe Herod has something to teach us by way of negative example. Maybe his is the story of what happens when we treat the incarnate truth too casually. Too neutrally. When we approach Jesus with curiosity, perplexity, and maybe even fascination — but then get stuck, never crossing over from spectatorship to discipleship. After all, Jesus doesn't want audience members; he wants followers.

Mark's Gospel tells us that Herod "enjoys listening" to John. This is an interesting tidbit. Herod enjoys listening to a man who calls him an adulterer? Why? I think it's because the truth — sharp, hard-edged, and costly though it often is — compels us. It draws us in. In a world overrun with doctored images, fake headlines, exaggerated claims, and blatant lies, truth is precious. It draws our gaze and pricks our ears. It suggests to us that coherence and alignment are possible; we don't have to live in constant disharmony, our words, actions, and desires permanently in conflict. Something in us hungers for the truth. We fear it and need it, all at once.

In my imagination, Herod spends hours at a time sitting by John's prison cell, listening to the truth that cuts in order to heal. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, lustful for power and yet dissatisfied with what power has made of him, he asks questions. He probes.

He wonders. He hopes. He fears. He learns about Jesus, the one whose sandals John feels unworthy to untie. He asks about God, baptism, forgiveness, salvation. He compares the clear authenticity of John's mission and message to his own compromised, convoluted life. And maybe — maybe — he yearns.

But then? Then the rubber hits the road. The time comes to make a decision. Right over wrong. Humility over power. Integrity over compromise. Truth over lies. The time comes to care more about saving a life than saving face. To move from a perplexed fascination with truth to a faithful stewardship of truth.

In other words, what happens in the aftermath of Herod's birthday party is the testing of the tetrarch. The testing of his character, his loyalties, his mind, his heart. The testing of his commitment to something costlier than the status quo.

How different the story would be if Herod passed this test. But he doesn't. He fails. When push comes to shove, his casual fascination with the truth isn't enough to transform him. He remains a hearer of the good news — not a doer.



If you're anything like me, you're thinking: Yeah, but I'm nothing like Herod. I've never put anyone to death. I've never sacrificed another human being to hang onto power. I've never committed murder to save face. Maybe not. But I wonder if the

questions we need to ask ourselves in light of Herod's story are subtler ones. No, I don't go around killing people. But do I care too much about what other people think of me? Do I value my status, reputation, and popularity more than I do the truth? Am I so bent on conflict-avoidance that I harm others with my passivity? Do I prefer stability and safety more than transformation? Is my inner life and my outer life misaligned, one always covering for the other?

These are personal questions on the one hand, but very public ones on the other. When I choose silence for the sake of convenience, whose life becomes expendable? When I decide that justice is too messy, chaotic, or costly for me to pursue, who suffers in the long term? Whose vulnerability do I depend on and benefit from to keep my own comforts intact?

These aren't good news questions — if by "good news" we mean news that makes us feel good. But they are gospel questions. They're the questions I suspect John would ask. They're the questions I believe Jesus asks. They're the questions both men died for asking.

To his credit, Herod begins in the right place. He begins with curiosity. With perplexity. With desire. It's fine to begin where he does — as a listener, intrigued but uncommitted. The danger is in staying there. The danger is in deciding that a disinterested fascination with Jesus is enough. The danger is in silencing the truth that never stops trying to save us.

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