

Mark 6:14-29 *“It’s Not an Easy Life”*

It has been quite some time since the lectionary included a story about John the Baptist, not to mention that by this time, the story is more of a memory than anything else. While this is the story of John’s death, it begins by mentioning both Herod and Jesus. The linkage of Herod, John, and Jesus is essential to the text. John and Jesus have been linked before in the pregnancy of Mary and Elizabeth. John prepared the way for Jesus. John baptized Jesus and now John and Jesus are connected to Herod, who will play a role in their deaths. John’s disciples came and took up his corpse and laid it in a tomb, and then Joseph of Arimathea did the same for Jesus. We must remember that many of the stories are not told in chronological order, but then why does Mark place this story here? Why does Mark suddenly turn away from telling stories about Jesus in this flashback about John the Baptist? Although the story of the death of John the Baptist is one of the most famous horror stories in the Bible, Mark has something for us. We learn that John put himself in God’s hands, went where God told him to go, and did what God told him to say and do. God was in control of John’s life, and that is an excellent example for us believers to follow. John’s death was crucial because it was a preview of the death of Jesus. This story also serves as a warning of the dangers involved to those who proclaim God’s Word, and it also reminds us that nothing can stand in the way of God’s kingdom. Before continuing, let’s take a moment to pray.

Lord, make us strong and immovable and help us to grow today into godly people. Let the lies and distractions of the enemy fall dead at our feet and fly over our heads, never taking root in our thoughts or hearts. Father, amplify Your voice and Your Truth above all other voices in our lives. Help us to be laser-focused on You, Father, so we are able to withstand the arrow of distraction inevitably pointed in our direction.

Mark’s writing shows that Jesus’ name was spreading throughout the region and had become well-known. Yet before Jesus, here was John the Baptist, a man whom King Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great when Jesus was born, “feared” John because the multitude regarded John as a prophet. Herod knew that John the Baptist was a just and holy man. Herod actually revered him and enjoyed hearing him speak. Alas, the king’s unhappy partner, his second wife Herodias, was a hardened woman. She hated John the Baptist for his faithful testimony adhering to the Mosaic Law of divorce, for it was unlawful to take on a brother’s wife.

He was infuriated by John's condemnation of her marriage. Her wickedness let her not rest until she saw him dead.

Following Herod's birthday banquet, in the midst of drinking and dancing and a moment of excitement, he grants the wickedness of his wife's daughter, Salome, to request to have the head of John the Baptist cut off. The next day, when Herod came to his senses resulting from feasting and merry-making, he repented to clear his head from the door of temptation. How little a reward for one of God's best servants who became unjustly imprisoned and fell to a violent death. John walked by faith and not by sight. John sowed, labored, and fought under undue persecution, knowing all along that there would be a glorious harvest yet to come. Thus, the value of genuine religion is not to be measured by the things seen but by the things unseen, and as we read in the book of Romans, "The sufferings of this present time are not worthy of being compared with the glory which shall be revealed." When the emperor Caligula found out what had happened, both Herod and Herodias were banished into exile.

Mark inserts this ghastly story to unveil the curtain surrounding the hollowness of life's pleasures in the events of shame and false pride. John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." You see, in short, according to Mosaic Law, only after a brother's death would it have been a duty to marry his widow. In times of underlying hatred, the point is how we can think when grudges overwhelm the heart, leading to sinful actions. Is this not what happens when we deal between the voice of indecision and the voice of conscience? In moments of moral weakness? It's not an easy life!

If Herod had only listened to John, what a different life story his might have been! For though he had committed a terrible sin, it was not an unpardonable sin. David, the man after God's own heart, had sinned every bit as black. But David, when Nathan rebuked him and brought his sin to his remembrance, listened, humbled himself, repented in dust and ashes, and cried, "Be merciful to me, O God." And Herod might have been where David is; he might have sat at the same King's table as David does; he might have worn the white robe which David does; he might have joined in the song which David sings; he might have been called "a man after God's own heart," as David is—if only he had listened to John and humbled himself and repented. But though he listened and was much perplexed, he failed to repent, and so he made his bed in hell. It's not an easy life.

Imagine the grief that John's disciples felt when they learned of his head lying headless on that prison floor—perhaps the murder of the greatest prophet ever to live. In the account of Matthew's gospel, Matthew reports that they went and reported to Jesus. Herod thought to seek and see Jesus, but that meeting would not take place until just a few hours before Jesus' crucifixion. **JOHNS DISCIPLES BURY HIS BODY.**

This narrative plainly shows the unrestrained power of corruption and no morality when it comes to torture and murder. If we look back into the world history books, we see people like Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, Nero, Genghis Khan, and, in recent weeks, the President of Russia, all of whom had one thing in common: unyielding power. People who were unaccountable to anyone beyond themselves. Rulers with no moral compass. In the book of Exodus, we can read about the evil wickedness of the Pharaoh, the most powerful ruler in the world of his day. In this story, we see the same evil in Herod, who, like his father, was known for his cruelty. Strikingly, we see the same cruelty in Herodias simply because John, as a prophet, struck against the law of morality.

The single greatest restraint that God has put in this world is conscience. Even people who are described as being without conscience have not been able to hear that voice of right and wrong that God has implanted his law in every human creature on this earth. The law of God is not merely known through the Ten Commandments set before Moses or from sacred scripture. The apostle Paul stated that death reigned from Adam to Moses. Paul wrote in the book of Romans, "What then shall we say? That the law is a sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, You shall not covet." From 1 John 1:8, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Before the Ten Commandments, God planted his law internally in every human being's conscience. Let us not deceive ourselves; we should let our conscience be our guide because if we do, we will be guided into disaster. Why? Because although God has planted conscience into every creature, our ongoing sin will silence the voice of God. If we allow our conscience to be our guide, we can easily turn to a life of unrestricted wickedness.

Years ago, a study was conducted on holiness and its effect on human beings. The study concluded that while holiness is repulsive to the sinner, it has a certain fascination. We know that

our lives are not right, and when the holy comes near, as fearful as it is, we have a certain attraction to it. When John comes into the presence of Herod, Herod is fascinated, but he fears John because he is a just and holy man.

I'll leave you with a story told by R. C. Sproul about a friend of his who was on the PGA golf tour. This man had another friend who had been voted the golfer of the year decades ago and was the defending champion of a tournament held in the South. In the Pro-Amateur event before the tournament, he was paired with Jack Nicklaus, Billy Graham, and the President of the United States. Imagine what a foursome that was. After the round of golf, this man stormed off the eighteenth hole, went over to the practice tee, took out his driver, and began beating drives out into the practice area in a state of fury. The friend who was watching him asked, "What's the matter"? In reply, I don't need to have Billy Graham forcing religion down my throat! The golfer went back to pounding drives down the practice tee. When he was finished and put his driver back into his bag, the friend said, Billy must have really come on strong to you. The golfer hung his head and said no; actually, Billy never said a word about religion. I just had a bad round. Fascinating.

Billy Graham didn't have to say anything. His mere presence and what he represented to this golfer was enough to make him supremely uncomfortable. This golfer was like Herod Agrippa in front of John the Baptist. I know who he is. He is a just and holy man, and I am fascinated by him, but yet, although I am fearful of him, I am going to protect him.

Friends, life is not easy. Last week, I left you with this question: What do people have against Jesus and God? Here is my reply. People are fearful of what the law of God forbids. Society has lost its understanding of the sanctity of oaths and keeping those promises. We promise certain things before God as witnesses before family and the church, and as soon as the service is over, we forget about them. We must learn to guard the oaths we take with our lives. Our culture has become barbarian, slaughtering millions of babies every year. History has taught us these things only happen in barbarian cultures. But people say that once things like this become legal, it's okay. The only thing is that they do not bring heads on platters. As the disciples learned of John's demise, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. A foreshadowing of what was yet to come with the disciples of Jesus who gave him a burial, sanctifying the place where he was laid. Let's pray

Father, help us not to have a conscience so eroded that we feel nothing at the destruction of the innocent and of the righteous. Help us not take what is and holy and hide it away in a prison. For Jesus' sake, we ask, Amen.