

## Unarmed and Dangerous

Texts: 2 Samuel 6:1-5,12-19;  
Ephesians 1:3-14, (Series B, 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost) Psalm 24;  
Mark 6:14-29

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

### Let us prayer:

In the early 1920s, Gandhi and his India's National Congress Party began moving more and more towards civil disobedience as a chief political strategy in order to achieve independence from British colonial rule. In spite of violent setbacks to the cause and regular clashes with British authorities, which frequently landed him in jail, the founder of modern India never gave up his vision that the British could be driven out from India without shedding blood; and he continued to walk his way back and forth across the country preaching the gospel of non-violent resistance.

As he did so, his reputation began to spread throughout the Indian such that both Hindus and Muslims would come from long distances on foot, with their bedding on their heads and shoulders, on bull drawn carts, and on horse back just to see and hear him.

Never before, had any political or perhaps religious leader, in his own lifetime stirred the masses to their very depths throughout the country and received the homage of so many people.

Eventually, the British Governor of Madras, who has no love for Gandhi, was forced to declare that British Rule was now dealing with an entirely new political situation. Gandhi is here with the whole of his gang.

There is no doubt that Gandhi has got a tremendous hold on the public imagination. Admitted by a British official. Because this is the kind of threat that the rulers of this world fear most.

Mark plunged us down squarely in the world of real politics in today's gospel. It is the only story in the Gospel of any length that is not about Jesus; and it is no accident that Mark places it where he does. Jesus has just finished giving instructions to his disciples about how they are to embody God's love in the world.

Expect opposition and plenty of trouble, he tells them, but the only thing you need to take with you is the gospel and a *confident faith*. And then, Mark, as if to "slam dunk" his point reminds us of the story of John the Baptist; and he does it in a very deliberate way.

In the first place he does it by reminding us of the fear of King Herod. This is not Herod the Great, who ruled Israel around the time of Jesus' birth. This is Herod the Great's son by his Samaritan wife Malthace. He was called Herod Antipas, and as the saying goes the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Carbon copy of his father.

He was an ambitious, half-Jew, who, although he enjoyed great power and wealth, was despised both by his Roman masters and his Jewish subjects. He thumbed his nose at Israel's religious laws, both by marrying his brother's wife Herodias and by building his capital city, Tiberias, on top of a pagan cemetery.

The gospels, as well as historian Josephus, tell us that Herod got into a deep controversy with John the Baptist. John was mad at Herod for many reasons; but the one that really wedged in John's ribs was Herod's marriage to Herodias.

John publicly criticized this famous couple of "*living in sin*" and that was enough to turn Herodias practically purple with rage. Demonstrating that she was the one who wore the pants in the family, Herodias convinced Herod Antipas into throwing John in jail shut him up until she could figure out what to do with him.

Well, apparently Herod feared John almost as much as he feared his wife. He knew how popular John was with the people and how dangerous it could be politically if there was ever an uprising over whatever he decided to do to John. At least in prison he could shut him up and keep an eye on him, as well as keep peace in his own bedroom.

But it wasn't just fear that motivated Herod. He was fascinated by John and couldn't help sneaking out of the bedroom at night and wandering down to the dark cell block so that he could hear John ranting. The picture Mark paints is of a man who is transfixed with the very thing he fears and despises.

"When he heard him," Mark says, *...he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him.* Unfortunately, this *fascination* was not enough to convince him to change his heart and the way he was living.

On Herod's birthday, he threw a big party for himself, but he unintentionally set in motion forces the consequences of which he could never have foreseen. It was a banquet done in a fashion to impress all of Herod's political cronies and enemies and to offend the religiously elite.

The climax was when Herodias' daughter Salome, who was actually Herod's niece, danced licentious dance that was meant to arouse Herod and make him vulnerable to suggestion.

Whether the sexy Salome meant anything by it other than showing off her stuff, her mother saw it as the chance she had been waiting for. Caught up in the moment like a dirty-old man and macho ruler, Herod gave in to both his lust and his pride by following through on an oath to Salome to give her anything she wanted, even half of his kingdom.

Herodias made sure that it was John's head on a platter that *"she wanted"*; not a cottage by the lake, an Mercedes SUV, or holidays on an exotic Island, but John's head and that, as they say, was the end of John the Baptist. Or so everyone thought.

By the time Mark tells us this story, John has been dead for some time and Jesus has been actively preaching his own message throughout Galilee. Although Herod apparently didn't know Jesus, he knew that something equally as powerful as John was stirring out there among the people.

...when Herod heard of it, he said, "*John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.*" This is what Mark wants to tell us. This is not just a story to remind us of the dangers of preaching the truth, although that is certainly true. It is a story to remind us of the delusions of the powerful. Herod's own actions have produced in him a deep-seated fear about the results of his deed.

Therefore, he interprets what he hears about Jesus "*and his disciples*" by imagining John having come back to get him. You see, my friends, *fear is the dark room where we develop our negative thoughts.* The truth-telling for Mark's congregation is telling the truth about the gospel even if it meant losing your head.

Mark says that even defenseless, unarmed, de-capitated, dead men, like John the Baptist, do come back to haunt the powerful of this world. *Yes! they do.* One of the things that kept such moral and religious giants like Gandhi going in the face of such overwhelming odds was the profound conviction, not just that love would eventually conquer, but that evil would defeat itself. "When I despair," he said, "I remember that throughout history tyrants and dictators have always failed in the end. Think of it. Always they fail."

And you and I, are part of what the prophets called a "*saving remnant*", that is to say, any one who put his / her hand on the plow and turns back from the truth-telling in fact denies the whole counsel of God.

*Ephesians 1:3-14* - This opening summary of the letter to the church at Ephesus is in the form of a prayer of blessing. God's work of election of believers is set forth.

God's grace is lavishly bestowed on believers through Jesus Christ. God's saving work is conceived as a mystery that is now revealed. The church thus becomes the means by which God's manifold wisdom is displayed.

Mark recounts in sordid detail the death of John the Baptist in order not just to explain the fate of John, but also as the foreshadow of Jesus' death. The portrait of the Herodian court takes on the character of a medieval morality play: *an impressive political gathering, a dancing girl, a drunken oath and a devious wife* determine the end of one of the great prophets of Israel.

But, this morning's message also suggests, Mark's larger purpose is to encourage members of his own congregation with a reminder of how the rulers of this world are always haunted by their own dark deeds, thereby giving hope to all who dare to wear the prophetic mantle that their work is not in vain.

What does Mark's story indicate about what Herod was not able to do? *"He cut off his head, but he did not cut off the voice. He curbed the tongue but he did not curb the accusation."*

The almost fine print from Paul says when we have heard the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation, and had believed in him then you / we are marked with the Holy Spirit's seal.

God and Jesus want us to have all that is offered. Our acceptance is demonstrated when we stand tall and upright *in our faith, hearing, believing, and living* as holy and blameless as we can, with all wisdom and insight he has made known to us. God's positive pronouncement of forgiveness and redemption.

In what way does this give us hope? *That the Word of the Lord shall stand forever.* It really doesn't matter what spin we put on the truth, *God's Word will always remind True. Amen.*

**Prayer concerns:** *Matilda Molyneaux-Piper, Wess Bourgaize, Johannes Eidnes, Hanne Bourgeoise, Ellen Eriksen, & Covid -19 patients, essential and Frontline workers.*

God of Presence and Promise, from within the mystery of Your Will, we receive the riches of grace granting us the forgiveness of our trespasses, the gift of every spiritual blessing, and the inheritance of redemption through Your Holy Son. Grant us each the willingness and courage to pledge ourselves to the praise and glory of Your name, through every word and action of our earthly lives. We ask through Jesus the Christ, our Redeemer; and the Seal of the Holy Spirit, who together with You, reign as One God, now and forever. **Amen.**

**Make melodies in your heart with these hymns:**

- When I Survey the Wondrous Cross # 803
- Jesu, Jesu Fill Us with Your Love # 708
- The Church's One Foundation # 654

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

Hyacinth Marshall