



Palm Sunday

April 9, 2017
Laurel Neal



Mark 6:14-29 (NIV)

John the Baptist Beheaded

King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

Others said, "He is Elijah."

And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago."

But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!"

For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

The king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

She went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?”

“The head of John the Baptist,” she answered.

At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: “I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John’s disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

John the Forerunner: His Head on a Platter

Mark 6:14-29

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I

We've spent the season of Lent with John the Forerunner. In previous weeks we've examined

- John's purpose,
 - his preaching,
 - his perspective,
 - and his perplexity.

We know that God created John with a specific purpose in mind: that he would *make ready a people prepared for the Lord*. And that God did this because God was planning to visit the world in person in Jesus. We know that John looked and acted like an Old Testament prophet. That his preaching was direct and intense — and focused on repentance. And we learned that repentance has nothing to do with feeling sorry for our sins — and everything to do with life-change. The kind of change that gets our lives — our mind, heart, direction, behavior, and relationships — into proper alignment with God. In order to make ready a people prepared for the Lord, John preached about this kind of change to everyone. He preached about it to the general public — and also to Israel's religious leaders and the upper crust. Remarkably, he became enormously popular.

Then Jesus showed up. And John recognized Jesus as the One in whom God was visiting the world in person. John's perspective on this was simple: he thought he needed to decrease in importance and prominence, so Jesus could increase. And that's what happened — most especially when John got thrown in jail for criticizing the king, Herod Antipas, in

public. Jail gave John a lot of time to think, and he began to have some doubts about Jesus. He became perplexed, because Jesus wasn't changing Israel in the ways John had anticipated or expected. After all, Jesus hadn't done anything cataclysmic or called anyone to account. He hadn't done anything at all in the strategic city of Jerusalem. Nor had Jesus done anything "to change the basic structural problems" in Israel.¹

So, as we heard last week, John sent a few of his own disciples to ask Jesus point blank: "Are you, in fact, the One we've been waiting for, or should we be looking for somebody else?" Jesus replied that yes, he was the One John and Israel had been waiting for. Then he blessed John for being the kind of person who wouldn't reject him just because he was a different kind of Messiah than John was expecting.

Which brings us to today's passage in Mark 6, where we learn what finally became of John. Mark inserts this story into his description of the expanding ministry of Jesus — a ministry which was making Jesus increasingly visible and increasingly popular in Israel. And Mark tells this story in a way that relates to Holy Week, which begins today. You see, after Jesus was baptized by John, his ministry grew — and then it grew even more after John was killed. Increasingly, people wondered who Jesus was. They discussed him and advanced various theories about his identity. Some people speculated that Jesus was John the Forerunner raised from the dead. Others speculated that Jesus was the Old Testament prophet, Elijah — or perhaps another prophet like the prophets of old. These speculations even reached Herod the King — and Herod had a strong opinion about who Jesus was. He was convinced that Jesus was John, raised from the dead. And he thought this, at least in part, because he had a guilty conscience about John — whom Herod had known, spoken with, thrown in jail, and finally beheaded.

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: The Christbook*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 505-506.

In Mark's gospel, by the time we get to chapter 6, John's been dead for some time — maybe even as long as a year or two. But this is where Mark tells what happened to John. The story revolves around a birthday party and three main characters: Herod, Herodias, and Herodias' daughter from her previous marriage.

II

So let's look, first, at Herod and Herodias and their connection with John — who, remember, was incredibly famous in 1st-century Israel. Herod not only knew about John — he knew John personally. He was among those who were drawn to John and his preaching. He was, in fact, fascinated by John — but John and his preaching also puzzled Herod. Herod could see that John was a righteous man, a holy man — but he was never convicted enough by John's preaching to repent. To change his life.² But Herod was inclined to protect John as much as possible — which is interesting because Herod wasn't really known for protecting people. What Herod was known for was his love of luxury and magnificent architecture, for his building projects in Galilee, and for being cunning, callous, and shrewd. Now, he wasn't nearly as ruthless as his dad, Herod the Great — who was king when Jesus and John were born. Herod the Great was famous for his extreme paranoia and for murdering people, including several members of his own family.

Our Herod — Herod Antipas — was one of three brothers who, at Caesar's behest, ruled three different regions of Palestine after the death of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas ruled the region of Galilee and built two new cities there — Tiberius and Sepphoris — both of which were quite lavish. Tiberius was erected on top of an ancient pagan cemetery — something that was against Jewish law and therefore, deeply offensive to the locals. It meant that the Jews who had to build Tiberius, or work there, were in a constant state of ritual uncleanness. But Herod didn't really care about any of this.

² Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel According to Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001, 215.

Then, of course, Herod fell in love with his sister-in-law, Herodias, who was married to his half-brother, Philip, and was also his niece. But Herod divorced his wife in order to marry Herodias — and Herodias divorced Philip in order to marry Herod. All of which was a violation of 1500 years of Jewish law and custom — going all the way back to Moses and the book of Leviticus. It was this that John dared to point out in public, for all to hear.

Herodias' connection with John was narrower than her husband's — limited, really, to John's criticism of their marriage. Herod didn't know exactly what to make of John, but Herodias certainly did. She held John in contempt. So she pestered her husband until he finally threw John in prison to shut him up. But even that wasn't enough for her. She fed and nursed her grudge against John, and what she really wanted was to see him dead. But her husband, as I've already noted, was fascinated by John and even a little afraid of him. Sidelining John was one thing, but killing him was out of the question. So Herodias would just have to bide her time and wait for the right opportunity to present itself — which it finally did when Herod's birthday rolled around.

III

In the ancient world, the birthdays of rulers were usually public holidays, and the rulers often threw themselves one heck of a party. Herod, Mark observes, held a banquet in his own honor and invited all the big-shots he knew: all the high officials in his government, all his military commanders, and probably every wealthy and powerful man he knew in Galilee. Herodias — seeing the party as an opportune moment — surprised her husband and his guests with some special entertainment. She sent her teenage daughter in to dance for them, and we may well imagine what kind of dance this was. In fact, it pleased Herod so much, that — along with all the wine, and the festivity of the occasion, and all those important people in the room — well, Herod got quite carried away with his compliments. He offered to give the girl anything she wanted, up

to half his kingdom. Now, perhaps this “half my kingdom” thing was just a figure of speech, because Herod wasn’t actually at liberty to give away even an inch of his kingdom. It all belonged to the Roman Empire and not to him. And Herod was just a tetrarch — a subordinate ruler several layers below Caesar. Imagine the State Treasurer of Oregon offering to give away the Oregon coastline to someone or other, and you’ll have the general idea.

But the promise does tell us how chipper and magnanimous Herod was feeling at that moment — and how much he wanted to make a good impression on his guests. The girl, on the other hand, had no idea what she wanted. So she ran back to her mother for advice: “Mother, what shall I ask for?” And Herodias — who must have been delighted with how things were turning out — answered swiftly and simply: “Ask for the head of John the Baptizer.” Excited, the girl ran back to the king and announced, “I want the head of John the Baptizer — served up on a platter. And I want it now.”

Needless to say, Herod never saw this coming — though maybe he should have. The request sobered him up pretty fast, I imagine. And it also filled him with deep sadness — because, as we know, Herod thought of John as a righteous and holy man and had always been afraid of harming him. But Herodias had guessed right. Her husband was even more afraid of something else: losing face with his dinner guests. So Herod caved — and granted his step-daughter’s request without a moment’s delay. According to Mark: *The king sent the executioner off to the prison with orders to bring back John’s head. He went, cut off John’s head, brought it back on a platter, and presented it to the girl, who gave it to her mother.*

IV

And then we have this one-sentence epilogue in verse 29: *When John’s disciples heard about this, they came and got his body — literally, his corpse — and laid it in a tomb.* In other words, they gave John’s body a decent burial.

So it is that these words — and this story — send us into Holy Week. Palm Sunday commemorates the day Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem at the height of his public popularity. By week's end — just like John — he will have been plotted against, arrested, executed under pressure and without sufficient cause, and laid in a tomb by some of his followers. In fact, Mark uses the same words here in 6:29, *corpse* and *tomb* — and almost the same wording — that he uses later on in chapter 15 to describe what becomes of Jesus. Which means, I think, that Mark wants to draw a connection between what happens to John and what happens to Jesus. That Mark sees John as the Forerunner of Jesus, not just in life but also in death. That Mark is intentionally foreshadowing Jesus' death with this story of John's death. So let's let John and this story do the same things for us. Let's let everything we've learned from John, as well as his death, lead us into Holy Week — and, in particular, into the observance we come to late in the week that lasts for three days.

Taking into consideration that the Jewish definition of a day begins at sunset and ends at sunset, we have:

- Day One: sunset on Thursday to sunset on Friday — known to us as Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. This “day one” includes the events of Jesus' Last Supper, Crucifixion, and Burial.
- Day Two: sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday — known as Holy Saturday. That period of time during which God, in Jesus Christ, experienced the totality and finality of death.
- And Day Three: sunset on Saturday to sunset on Sunday — known to us as Easter. The day we anticipate, and then celebrate, the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

I hope you'll all be here next Sunday to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. But I hope you'll also remember that Easter's just one-third of something that lasts three days — and the culmination of what happens on the other two. I hope you'll find ways to observe and honor the Last Supper and

Crucifixion this week — perhaps by joining us for worship here on Friday at 7:30 p.m. And to be spiritually mindful during Holy Saturday. Because Easter will mean more to us, and matter more to us, if we experience it in the context of what precedes it: the sobering events of Jesus’ suffering and death — which were for us.