

"No Match"
Sermon by the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson
Mark 6:14-29
July 14, 2024 — Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

This is one of those Sundays when our standard response to the reading of Scripture may feel forced.

Mark introduces his entire Gospel with the pronouncement: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. But the Son of God doesn't even feature in this passage, and the account of John's death certainly doesn't sound like good news. It sounds like a grim report from the annals of Henry the Eighth's court, or like a scene from a Shakespearean tragedy. To find such a troubling tale in the "good news of Jesus Christ" is disconcerting, indeed. How could we possibly respond with: "Thanks be to God"?

We've not heard about John the Baptist for some time. Immediately following the Gospel's introductory words, John "appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (1:4, NIV). Jesus — as we know — came to John to be baptized and was then driven into the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil. At some point during those forty days, John was arrested. The Gospel writer shares this news only in passing: *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God*, Mark reports. He's not really giving us a status update on John the Baptist. Rather, it is a signal — right there at the beginning of Jesus' ministry — that the good news of Jesus Christ will unfold against a backdrop of *bad* news. That the kingdoms of this world will not take kindly to the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God.

Now — half-way between Jesus' baptism at the Jordan and his triumphal entry into Jerusalem — we finally learn what has become of John the Baptist. Mark interrupts his narrative to let us know just how far the kingdoms of this world will go. They will do more than *reject* God's prophets, as we saw the people of Nazareth do in last week's text, when they took offense at Jesus. Those in positions of power will *silence* the prophets of God for daring to speak truth to power.

This, of course, is the reason Herod called for John's arrest. The Baptizer had criticized the king's unethical marriage. "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife," John had been telling the king. Whether or not this truth angered Herod, we do not know. But it certainly angered Herodias. She would have had the Baptizer killed sooner had it not been for her husband's fear of the man. But, as we learn from the Gospel writer, Herodias took the first opportunity that presented itself to demand the head of John the Baptist.

The flashback Mark inserts in his narrative almost sounds like fodder for a fable. It's the story of a foolish king and a conniving queen, and a child who becomes a pawn in her parent's game. It's the story of a mesmerizing dance and a moronic promise, of a shocking request and an even more

shocking response. The story is so absurd that we almost expect an explicit lesson about the dangers of hubris.

But, of course, the story doesn't end that way. It is not a fable — but a tragic tale of what happens when those in positions of power care more about preserving that power than with using it to do what is righteous and holy. From the beginning, we see that Herodias is motivated only by conceit; she cannot tolerate the well-deserved critiques made by John, so she calls for his death. At first, Herod tries to satisfy his wife's desire for vengeance by putting John in prison. But, when the spotlight is on him in front of the court, Herod succumbs to the same temptation. Turns out he would rather condemn an innocent man than suffer embarrassment in front of Galilee's elite. Such is the arrogance of this puppet-king.

It would be easier to stomach this story if Herod were simply a caricature. A puffed-up parody — a buffoon with a crown, like some of his biblical predecessors. But he isn't. Herod is complex. He has a conscience. He just chooses not to heed it. That's what makes this whole thing so troubling. Herod knows that John the Baptist is a righteous and holy man, doing righteous and holy work. He has not always understood John's teachings but, still, Herod has listened to him. But, ultimately, Herod chooses to protect his own interests rather than preserve a prophet's life. So the puppet-king keeps his foolish promise and demands the death of John the Baptist.

The prophet's head on a platter is not the only thing that makes our stomachs turn. This story is also troubling because it sounds all too familiar. Not the details, of course. But the tragic impulses that lead to them ... The impulse to destroy a political rival in order to preserve one's own appearance or status. To turn so quickly to vengeance and violence. To protect personal interests at the expense of the common good. To choose what is easy over what is right. The need to cling to power, no matter the cost.

Leaders of all kinds in all places still struggle with the temptations of power, even in systems set up to ensure power is shared and its abuses are held in check. It is so common as to seem inevitable. Which can leave us feeling powerless. Listless. Hopeless, even.

That's where this story could leave us, too. Feeling dejected and despairing. Searching for a shred of hope in this so-called "good news." Wondering how we could possibly respond to this text with the words, "Thanks be to God."

But, as I hope you expect of the Gospel, the good news is there, even if it's initially hard to see.

At the very beginning of his narrative, Mark signaled that the good news of Jesus Christ will unfold against a backdrop of *bad* news. But here, in chapter six, we see that even the most dire report is surrounded by reports of the miraculous in-breaking of God's Kingdom. After Jesus returned from forty days in the wilderness, he healed a demoniac and cured a paralytic; he cleansed a leper and

restored a young girl to life. He calmed a storm at sea and empowered disciples to cast out demons. At every turn, Jesus has demonstrated that love is stronger than the forces of death; he has overcome fear and proclaimed through word and deed that the Kingdom of God has come near. And his ministry has put the kingdoms of this world on alert. That is the very reason Mark interrupts his narrative to tell of the Baptist's demise. Because word of Jesus' deeds of power has reached the King and raised his alarm. Herod does not understand who this Jesus is. But he does understand that a greater power is at work — a power that is stronger even than the forces of death. *John, whom I beheaded, has been raised*, Herod concludes.

And, in the second half of his ministry, Jesus will continue to teach and preach and heal and bless. Immediately following the story of John's execution, Mark picks up the narrative with his account of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. Somehow, Jesus multiplies five loaves and two fish into a meal for a multitude; somehow, all eat and are filled. This, it seems, is what a feast looks like in the Kingdom of God. And it could not be more different from a feast held in a kingdom of this world. At Herod's banquet, power is used to destroy. At the feast Jesus prepares, power is used to bless. At one, a life is taken. At the other, life is sustained. This, the Gospel makes clear, is the contrast between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God that Jesus is establishing.

If the story died with John the Baptist, we might conclude that the kingdoms of this world are all-powerful. But the witness of the Gospel is that power-hungry rulers are no match for God. For, when the powers-that-be try to silence another prophet, the story will take a dramatic turn. It will end not with rumors of John's resurrection, but with the truth of the Messiah's resurrection. And when the tomb is found empty, the world will see that God alone reigns sovereign, even over the forces of death. When the tomb is found empty, the world will see that the power of love is — and always will be — greater than the love of power. That is good news, indeed!

But even before we reach that triumphant end, we can find reason for hope. We can find reason to believe that the death-dealing kingdoms of this world will *not* have the last word. Because — even in the tragic tale before us today — the last word goes *not* to Herod, but to the disciples of John. *When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb*, Mark tells us. When John's disciples heard that Herod had put to death this righteous and holy man, they did a righteous and holy thing. Despite the risk involved, they mustered the courage to approach Herod's guards and demand a dignified burial for their teacher. Despite the risk involved, they "[declared] allegiance to John and the movement he led."¹ They did this without knowing how the story would end; all they had was faith in a different way, hope for a better world.

The courage of John's disciples is a witness to us, the disciples of Jesus Christ. Those who follow the one who was raised from the dead. The one who showed us that the kingdoms of this world are no match for the Kingdom of God.

¹ Matt Skinner, "Commentary on Mark 6:14-29," workingpreacher.org.

This good news has inspired the faithful in every age to stand — like the disciples of John — against the forces of destruction and death. Sometimes, even to stand up to the kingdoms of this world ...

In the months leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall, a congregation in Leipzig found itself at the center of the city's resistance to the government of the German Democratic Republic. Every Monday evening, people would gather at St. Nicholas Church to pray for peace and discuss ways to effect change in their country. As the movement gathered momentum, the authorities used various tactics to quell the demonstrations. But despite warnings and, even, death threats, the crowd at the church continued to grow. By October of 1989, a violent confrontation seemed inevitable.

A colleague tells the story this way:

Fearing the size of the Monday night gathering on October 9, 1989 the police put out a warning that any demonstration would be stopped 'with whatever means necessary.' Doctors [at] nearby hospitals stopped by the church before the October 9 gathering to inform the pastor that they were making preparations to deal with [a] flood of gunshot wounds ... The pastor was nervous. He didn't know what to expect. [That evening] 7,000 people crammed into the church and over 70,000 people stood on the streets surrounding the church. Each person held a candle in their hands — ... a symbol of non-violence. You see, to keep a candle from going out on a cold October night in Leipzig, you have to hold the candle with both hands, which makes it impossible to throw a stone. There, alongside the 70,000 people in the streets, were [tanks], ready for the protestors to turn violent. But they never did ... A government official said later, 'We had everything planned. We were ready for anything — except candles and prayers.' The tanks withdrew.²

And, one month later, the Berlin wall fell.

On that evening in Leipzig, candles and prayers proved more powerful than military might. And a crowd of peaceful protestors proved that the death-dealing kingdoms of this world will not have the last word. Because righteous and holy work can lead to another way, a better world. Even when discouraging or distressing or downright tragic stories leave us feeling powerless or listless or hopeless, we can lay claim to the good news. We can have faith that all is not lost. For we follow one who has shown that the love of power is no match for the power of love. And the kingdoms of this world are no match for the Kingdom of God. And for that we say, Thanks be to God.

² Ignacio Castuera, "Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (January 29, 2017)," processandfaith.org.