

“Two Engines and a Triangle”

Mark 6:14-29

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination: Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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It is the summer blockbuster season. Movies full of action, adventure, thrillers and superheroes draw you back into the theaters after a long pandemic hiatus. Today, you may have thought we'd show one of the Bible's Top 5 blockbusters of all time.

This passage does not stray far from the drama we like to see on the big screen. The Gospel writer of Mark interrupts the narration of an essential chapter of Jesus' ministry, with what seems to be a “flashback” that is itself a story of intrigue, shocking violence and the struggle between good and evil. It's a sordid tale of anger and revenge, resentment and death.

Just before this story, Jesus has sent out the disciples to carry out his ministry, “with authority”! They preach repentance, and call back people to a life God intends. They heal the sick. They defeat evil. That is good news and full of potential for the God-infused ministry into which Jesus calls the disciples. Fade to black!

When the scene changes, Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee enters. He is weak, reckless and quite unfit to hold power. (The family relation here is that this Herod, is the son of the more famous and notorious, “Herod the Great” who was alive at the time of Jesus’ birth). This Herod ruled Galilee as a roman client and reported to Emperor Tiberius. Herod Antipas appears nowhere else in the Gospel of Mark.

Herod has married his brother’s ex-wife, against Jewish Law. Not a good idea for a leader whose power is already quite fragile to publicly violate that law. John the Baptizer has pointed this out, evidently forcefully; and the wife does not like that. However, she has no formal power and Herod apparently doesn’t want to do anything more than imprison John. He’s both fearful of John and intrigued by him. The power dynamic here within the triangle of Herod, Herodias and John the Baptist is epic.

An opportunity arises and Herodias, the wife, seizes on it! Now is her chance. Herod, so trapped by his ego and insecurity, by his power and his weakness and foolishness, publicly, openly has given his word to his daughter (who is influenced by her scheming mother).

John’s head is delivered on a platter as the final course at the birthday party. And later, John’s disciples arrive and take his body for burial.

That’s the story. What does this have to do with us?

We know about feeling trapped. Or being caught in our own wrongdoing.

We also can be easily influenced by those who proclaim they can bring us fame or power or money.

We know what it's like to be called out, exposing our weaknesses, making us feel vulnerable.

We know how we can rage when we want sweet revenge or to exploit another for satisfaction or self-gain, regardless of the consequences.

Years ago, *The Washington Post* quoted a lavishly paid lobbyist, who said: "There are only two engines that drive Washington: One is greed, and the other is fear." That's a fine description of what happens at Herod's birthday party.¹

This story highlights the themes not just set in 1st Century Galilee. They are brutal reminders of the powers of evil in our world and in our lives.

Mark steps out of the demon filled world and shows us real politics at work in the world. These are what the death dealing forces look like in the context of the day. We see Herod's foolishness and arrogance. We see Herod's greed and his fear.

We also know of the dangerous character of John's witness and John's ministry in and around Galilee. It creates a level of disruption to the reigning political powers. We see a perennial clash between imperial power that seeks personal gain through exploitation and the powers to restore, to heal and proclaim the good news of repentance.

John's message is pretty clear — there is conflict between the ways of God's realm and the ways of imperial power. Upsetting that kind of power comes with consequences. God's agents would suffer death. We know that neither John nor Jesus shirks that message and responsibility even unto death.

Herod's pledge to his daughter — offering up to half a kingdom that is not his to grant — is an arrogant boast, meant to impress the other elites in attendance. Such irresponsible use of power becomes his undoing, for the preservation of his honor prevents him from breaking the promise, and killing John reveals him as a thug who eliminates God's prophet even though he knew John to be “a righteous and holy man” (v.20).

Herod backed himself into a corner and he doesn't have moral courage to do the right thing. Herod exposes himself as a man with no control over himself, his words, his power, his household, and his kingdom. Herod allowed the empire to shape his values and decisions.

Greed and Fear are powerful engines in this story. They are powerful influences in our world today.

The terrible thing is that maybe we don't find this all too shocking anymore. We are inundated with those in power at all levels making promises and only leaving dysfunction in their wake.

But what happens when we honor the wrong people?

Rome chose a pompous leader to govern Galilee, and he represents a culture fueled by power and privilege that will do anything to extend its capacity to pursue its own desires, hold onto power, trumpet its own self-importance, eliminate criticism and resist the justice and peace that God longs to bring to fruition. John does what he has been doing all along: calling for repentance. This story illustrates what it looks like when corruption and pride make repentance impossible.

You may wonder why Mark tells us this story. This is the only tale in which Jesus never appears. Its villains never reappear (cf. Luke

23:6-12). It's a strange story about John in which the baptizer himself never appears. Even stranger: beneath this story of John is the story of Jesus. Mark records the story of John not simply to direct us to our future hope, but to remind us that faithfulness to God often costs us something in the present.

It's hard to find the Good News in a text like this. Everywhere greed and fear whisper: in Herod's ear, among Galilee's high and mighty, behind the curtain between mother and daughter, in a dungeon prison. Maybe Herod is a representative of the kind of moral bankruptcy that festers inside of human societies, corporations, families and institutions.

Because of John's death, Jesus' disciples' mission now looks more dangerous. In calling people to repent they may be walking on dangerous ground. A prophet's work has always been like that. Speaking truth to power requires more than one voice. It needs a collective effort, involving the whole community.

I leave you with this. Herod's banquet is only the first of two banquets in Mark Chapter 6. Read a little further – or join us again next week. Herod's horrible banquet runs right into the story where Jesus makes sure that everyone is fed. Mark is a very careful writer. He wants us to hear these two stories together. Jesus hosts the second banquet, in the middle of nowhere for thousands of nobodies with nothing to offer save five loaves and two fish. And at that feast greed and fear have no place. There, all are fed to the full, with leftovers beyond comprehension (6:30-44).

Thanks be to God.

¹ Clifton Black, Workingpreacher.org, 2015. New Testament professor at PTS who was insightful on this passage.