

## Sermon July 14, 2024

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### Mark 6:14-29 *The Message*

King Herod heard of all this, for by this time the name of Jesus was on everyone's lips. He said, "This has to be John the Baptizer come back from the dead—that's why he's able to work miracles!"

Others said, "No, it's Elijah."

Others said, "He's a prophet, just like one of the old-time prophets."

But Herod wouldn't budge: "It's John, sure enough. I cut off his head, and now he's back, alive."

Herod was the one who had ordered the arrest of John, put him in chains, and sent him to prison at the nagging of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. For John had provoked Herod by naming his relationship with Herodias "adultery." Herodias, smoldering with hate, wanted to kill him, but didn't dare because Herod was in awe of John. Convinced that he was a holy man, he gave him special treatment. Whenever he listened to him he was miserable with guilt—and yet he couldn't stay away. Something in John kept pulling him back.

But a portentous day arrived when Herod threw a birthday party, inviting all the brass and bluebloods in Galilee. Herodias's daughter entered the banquet hall and danced for the guests. She charmed Herod and the guests.

The king said to the girl, "Ask me anything. I'll give you anything you want." Carried away, he kept on, "I swear, I'll split my kingdom with you if you say so!"

She went back to her mother and said, "What should I ask for?"

"Ask for the head of John the Baptizer."

Excited, she ran back to the king and said, "I want the head of John the Baptizer served up on a platter. And I want it now!"

That sobered the king up fast. But unwilling to lose face with his guests, he caved in and let her have her wish. 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. When John's disciples heard about this, they came and got the body and gave it a decent burial.

## **The Dance**

When my father first remarried, he and my stepmother went to a party hosted by one of her friends. The next day he told me about it. "I finally figured out how to dance to rock music! You just move your hips and you don't have to move your feet!"

Today we hear about dancing... dancing where the whole body moves and changes everything. David is so full of joy before the presence of God, that all he can do is leap and swirl and dance through the streets. He didn't care who saw him or what he thought because his joy was so great that he couldn't contain it!

Herod cannot contain the lust and desire as he watches his stepdaughter dance. Her dancing is not motivated by joy, but by her mother's hate. Herod promises her anything she desires: "John the Baptizer's head on a platter."

We usually hear about John around Christmastime. As the bells jingle and we push and shove for the best Christmas gifts, John comes out of the wilderness wearing only camel skins and eating locusts and honey. "Repent!" he calls out, and all the people gather to be baptized in the Jordan... including Jesus.

When we meet John again in July, the news we hear is not good. The man who baptized and challenged the people... the first one to recognize who Jesus really is... is dead. The thundering prophet has been beheaded, a sure way to silence a noisy man.

One of God's prophetic voices is silenced forever.

All this happens as Jesus sends his own disciples out and expands his ministry. John, who prepared Jesus for his ministry also foreshadows his death. Again and again their stories intersect. John has a message and dedicated disciples; so does Jesus. The innocent John is killed by powerful people who are threatened by his truth telling. So is Jesus. Herod knows that John does not deserve to die; Pilate tries to bypass Jesus' execution. The point is not so much that John and Jesus are the same in some ways...

*but that speaking truth to power leads to the same kind of danger no matter who you are, disciple, prophet or the Son of God.*

Jesus' path towards the cross is a difficult one and he tells us over and over again that we must be willing to take up our own cross to follow him. In the early years of the church, that was a literal expectation. Lots of early followers were crucified – including Peter. Others were fed to the lions or stoned to death.

The decision to follow Christ was a matter of life and death.

The risk of faith is hard to understand, sitting here in our pews in Manchester. This church was founded generations ago and the risks of faith faded generations earlier. Life can be hard – really hard – but the fact is most of us will never be martyred for proclaiming Jesus as the Christ.

Yet we are still called to follow Jesus wherever he leads us, even if it doesn't make sense. We are expected to choose Jesus over everything else – even when the choice makes us uncomfortable. And what are we called to do?

- ♥ To love our neighbors, even when we really don't like them very much. Even when they shout at us.
- ♥ To forgive those who hurt us or even harder -- who hurt the people that we love most.
- ♥ To put God first... to always remember that God requires that we stand up for justice, show kindness and to live our faith... Always!

And when we answer the call, no matter how difficult it may be, we get glimpses of the kind of joy that filled David that day. We overflow with the presence of God... our hearts leap with joy. And maybe we even dance – moving our hips and feet and arms. Nothing can contain the joy that we experience when God is near.

Following Christ can be dangerous or uncomfortable, but it is also life-giving. John the Baptist didn't seek out death, neither did Jesus. And neither did Martin Luther King Jr. or the nine saints praying together in Mother Emmanuel Church or the thousands who die for their faith every year. Despite the risk, they all spoke the truth because they believed that God's promises of life are stronger than any threat of death.

These promises are the Good News which makes us want to dance and sing!

We see these promises immediately after Jesus hears of John's death. He goes out and feeds more than 5000 hungry people in a deserted place. Two fish and 5 loaves of bread becomes an extravagant, abundant feast. Herod's banquet yielded one deadly left-over: John the Baptist's head on a platter. After that dreadful meal, Jesus' feast offered enough for everyone with twelve overflowing baskets left over.

So let us join the dance of the faithful. Remember the abundant blessings found when we put our trust in God. In the stories of our faith, we learn that every day is a choice. God calls us to tell the truth about any situation

that brings pain and brokenness to our siblings. We speak out, not because we want to be martyrs. We speak out because we know that God's Holy Kingdom is near and God's presence surrounds us. We speak out because no matter where we are in life's journey, Jesus waits for us to join him there.

Amen

### **Invitation to Offering**

When David danced rejoicing before the Arc of the Covenant, his joy was not complete until he had made an offering of thanks, and distributed gifts of food and drink to all who were in need. Perhaps the most joyful and challenging of all the commandments is to generosity and mutual care: to love one another as God loves us. We will bless our gifts together and offer them to God in gratitude, heartfelt commitment, and praise.