



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 10, JULY 11, 2021  
2 SAMUEL 6:1-5, 12b-19; PSALM 24; EPHESIANS 1:3-14; MARK 6:14-29

## JOHN THE BAPTIST AND RED HERRINGS

**Mark 6:14-29** [*King Herod heard of Jesus and his disciples, 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, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."*]

*For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb."*]

Theologian and Episcopal priest Eric Law reminds us that whenever we study scripture, we must ask the question "What does God invite us to do, be, or change through the scriptures?"

The story of John the Baptist's execution is a gruesome one. Shocking.

The story is of a hideously unjust death, the result of a seemingly spite-filled, revenge-motivated request.

The story of John's execution as told in Mark's gospel has long captured the Western imagination, in the works of artists and theologians, authors, playwrights and filmmakers – it's been depicted in art forms for

generations, for centuries. ... and it's the women who are front and center in most of these.

Dangerous, scorned and scheming, shameless and self-serving **women**.

Herodias, bitter and vengeful.

Her daughter a seductive temptress, manipulating a hapless Herod with her female sexual bewitchment disguised as a birthday dance performance.

If you're familiar with the gospel story, you're likely familiar with this kind of depiction, particularly if you're of a certain age like me.

And so the teaching many of us have inherited from this kind of interpretation, consciously or not, is that women can be dangerous, they're not to be trusted, they live and operate outside the cultural bounds of moral decency, if pushed to do so. They have a seductive, saucy power that renders men exposed and vulnerable and detached from their ability to reason.

They are "other."

In reality, of course, none of this is in the text. It's pure interpretation. Interpretation that's been favored, and to an extent, taken on as true by a dominant culture with deep patriarchal roots.

It serves a purpose. This kind of interpretation justifies certain cultural norms imposed on women – norms which today, in these United States, still call to be challenged.

Norms are tricky, cultural interpretations have sticking power, and if they're not called out,

examined and challenged they really do endure. And they're never neutral.

As cultural beings, the cultural heritage of each of us and the shared cultural spaces in which we live shape our understandings, our interpretations. It is our culture that makes certain elements of a story hyper-visible, easy to relate to, certain interpretations easy to agree with and believe, whilst leaving other things, other details ... hidden.

This story from Mark's gospel has its own cultural context, it's the product of a particular group at a particular moment in history, and it's been experienced and interpreted over the last two thousand years by a wide variety of readers, each influenced by their own particular cultural reality.

In the Greco-Roman world in which our gospel story is set, the culture was very much centered on the systems and structures of power that *ostensibly imposed a very necessary control on what would otherwise be **mayhem***. Order was of the highest importance and chaos was to be kept at bay, *at all costs*.

So deeply embedded in the western mindset, *still*, is the belief that systems and structures serve us *all* by maintaining **highly prized stability**, that great, lasting, power systems, governments, economies, judiciaries, educational and ecclesial institutions have arisen to preserve the status quo. And for the individual, in the first century and today, power, and our relationship to it, is a defining aspect of each our lives.

So what of the Rev. Eric Law's opening question: 'What does God invite us to do,

change, or be through this passage?” ... when we read it together, here, today?

Giving the moral and behavioral failings of the characters of this story *all* our attention, focusing *solely* on the human players responsible for John’s execution, may be a red herring. Branding the women, especially, as the villains ... to be condemned, is an interpretation that deflects our attention from that which is the real horror embedded within this story:

**The failure of a human-built power system,  
its abuses  
its corrupt nature  
its disregard for human life and justice**

Perhaps the women in this story, deeply problematic though their behavior is, might be seen as, **welcomed** even, as truth-tellers, revealers, illuminators, the ones whose actions point to and expose the realities and dangers of misused and misdirected human power.

This is a story of power that serves itself.

Power that strives for stability over justice, self over society, order over righteousness.

This is a story of power that imposes and maintains cultural norms and behavioral expectations in service of the status quo,

that resists challenge and examination by making itself - - *largely invisible*, convincing us it’s not even there – offering up scapegoats as a way of bouncing our attention away from any need to reform.

This kind of power insists on conformity.

It seeks to demonize or villainize the dissenter, the resister, the challenger ... the revealer.

It very effectively identifies, judges, and condemns “the other.”

This past year-and-a-half has been significant. Globally, the pandemic, more locally/nationally our social uprisings have brought disruption and challenge - to stability, to the heavily guarded status quo. Depending on your own relationship to power, your place within the dominant culture, you might be feeling threat and anxiety, or you might be energized and motivated, or you might perhaps be feeling a bit of all those things. It’s complicated.

We can be confident, that given millennia of practice, the dominant culture will go to great lengths to identify the villains, name the one/the group responsible, throw up a smoke screen, give us a red-herring, in the hope that all our moralizing, judging, and strident finger-wagging *at people* bounces attention away from its own *systemic* misuse of power.

Scapegoats are created to satisfy and gratify us.

In its resource for racial reconciliation and justice, the Episcopal Church quotes theologian Emilie Townes:

“Hope is forged out of the biblical call to dig deep into our innards to tell the truth of what we see, feel, hear, and experience. And it reminds us that we must always show up in the face of relentless evil, particularly in such times when it appears so normal and natural in our midst.”

What is it that has become normalized, naturalized by our cultural experience, by a dominant culture that seeks to preserve itself

by remaining so hard to see for those of us within it, and even harder to change?

How might we stay vigilant: showing up in the face of relentless evil, of self-serving systems of power, refusing to be distracted from the work of justice by our inherited tendency to judge and condemn those who do not conform; refusing to be distracted from our call and purpose to love God and neighbor by a swift indictment of the behavior of those we don't know and so might not understand.

The women in the story of John the Baptist's execution are surely no role models, and personal transformation *is* certainly a part of our Christian task, but ... we must *also* make visible that which would much rather stay hidden, that which would continue to place a higher value on stability than justice, on a quiet and peaceful life than on the pursuit of righteousness, on conformity over the ability of all to be fully alive.

Just as we, as human beings, strive to be restored into fullness of relationship with God and with one another, *as individuals* - the cultural and power systems we participate in need that restoration *also* - and that's our job too, as community.

What does God invite us to do, change, or be in response to this Gospel passage here, today?

I think God invites us to be *with* one another (not set against each other), to listen to one another, to the fullness of our lived experience. To move toward greater mutual understanding, to resist judgement ... to conserve our energy, **instead**, for the work of justice and restoration; to be confident in, and not fearful, of the possibility of real and right change ahead, and to commit our passion and effort -- to that.

To heal. To love.



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