

Pastor Joe Polzin
 Mark 6:14-29
 “A King and His Kingdom”
 Year B – Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

“And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and give it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb” (Mark 6:27-29). *This is the Gospel of the Lord?*

Did anyone else have that moment, after hearing about this depraved and depressing account about John the Baptist’s death, and we ended that by saying, “*This is the Gospel of the Lord.*”? It may have even been a bit startling, especially how it was only a few weeks ago that we celebrated John’s nativity, and heard the great things prophesied for his life in God’s service.

And in a way, it’s good we have those automatic replies, “This is the Gospel of the Lord,” as long as we don’t take them for granted and say them mindlessly. Because what it teaches us is that even when everything in us revolts at calling something like *that* the Gospel, we’re confessing it to be true, even when we don’t understand. Even when it’s something as horrible as the beheading of the one who prepared the way for Christ, or for that matter, even something as horrible as the crucifixion of His own Son. In faith we say, this, too, is the Gospel.

Still, we wonder, why is Mark giving so much graphic detail about all this depressing stuff about heads on platters and John’s disciples having to place his body in a tomb? Mark spends way more time describing this episode than he did for either the baptism or temptation of Jesus *combined*. Jesus hardly is even mentioned in this passage. So, why all this nasty business about John? Why this king and his so-called wife? Why all this death?

Well, what Mark is showing us is that sometimes the only way you know what something is, is by knowing what it’s not. In Mark’s Gospel, no one really seems to know who Jesus is. He’s not a normal kind of guy. In our day and age, we have Jesus all figured out, or we think we do, anyway. We know who he is and what he came to do.

But when he was walking around Galilee, it wasn’t so obvious. All of a sudden, this man from Nazareth starts healing people and casting out demons, and his own family, his mother, and brothers and sisters think he’s literally insane. The scribes come down from Jerusalem and think he’s possessed by Beelzebul. Then he calms the storm on the Sea of Galilee and the disciples say, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

And then you get to chapter 6, and he sends out his disciples two by two, these 12 dim-witted nobodies, to go out and do exactly the same thing: to preach repentance, to cast out demons, and to heal the sick, all in the name of Jesus. And so, he goes viral. Everybody hears about Jesus, and so everybody is asking, “Who is this guy?”

Some say he’s John the Baptist, raised from the dead (v. 14), some say Elijah, and others say he is a “prophet, like one of the prophets of old” (v. 15). And then we get Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, the tetrarch of Galilee. And Herod chooses to go with option A, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised” (v. 16). You see, Herod has his own backstory with John. And Mark is going to tell us about Herod and how it is in his kingdom, so that we can better understand Jesus, and how it is with him.

So, we go back in time. Mark stops talking about what's going on in Galilee, and does a little segue, like a shimmery movie scene where you go back and see what's happened before. Herod had this messy, upper-class situation where he married his brother's wife. And it was John who exposed it for what it was: adultery. His so-called wife, Herodias, wanted to kill John, to shut him up. But Herod kind of liked John, and was a little bit afraid of him. Herod thought John was a righteous and holy man, that he was speaking God's Word. So, Herod kept John safe, even hearing him gladly, Mark tells us (v. 20).

But we're not told exactly what Herod thought. Did he want to go down to the Jordan to get baptized? Was he about to repent? Well, apparently he didn't get the chance. Whatever he was thinking, on Herod's birthday, there was this banquet. This pleasing dance, then a promise, then a request: John's head on a platter.

And here's where Herod has a choice. What kind of *king* is he going to be? What kind of *kingdom* is his kingdom going to be? Will he spare this prophet, this one who was speaking God's Word? Or will Herod spare his own place, his own position, his own power?

It turns out that Herod *can't* give up his own reputation in the eyes of his guests, he can't give up his position, or his power, or his brother's wife. And even though he's "exceedingly sorry," off comes the head, delivered up in style.

But the key is, this is not the end of the story, even though it's where our Gospel reading ends. But the very next verse in Mark chapter 6, verse 30, says "The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught." Remember those guys?

We heard this just last week, after Jesus was rejected in his hometown of Nazareth, and immediately before we hear about John, Jesus sent them out two by two to proclaim the kingdom of God. To proclaim new life, and healing, and casting out demons, and repentance, and belief in the Gospel. And they were doing exactly all those things, all the while we're being told about Herod, and this big mess at his banquet. And then the apostles come back right *after* we hear about John.

In other words, what Mark is doing is showing us that there are two kingdoms going on at the exact same time. Herod's kingdom, and Jesus' kingdom. And so the question set before *us* is, "What kind of king do you want to have? And whose kingdom do you want to live in?"

On one hand, you have Herod the king. In his kingdom, there was only one Lord, and that guy lived in Rome. And to advance yourself in this kingdom, to keep your place, you had to attach yourself to him, to Caesar. Herod knew the game, and he played it quite well. So, he was given the position to be a king of the Jews. And Herod would do anything to keep his place, to keep his power, to keep his life. Even if it meant killing a prophet of the Lord.

On the other hand, you have Jesus. In his kingdom, he is Lord. But this King and Lord was willing to *sacrifice* his rightful place, his rightful power, his rightful life. He was mockingly called "the king of the Jews" by those who killed him, even though it was completely accurate. He was dressed in purple robes and given a crown of thorns, and he was nailed to a cross. And here was the king of the Jews, the king of the whole world, hanging dead. And he willingly did this, so that he could offer the whole world eternal life.

Mark sets these two options before you: a king who kills in order to preserve his own life. Or a king who sacrifices his own life in order to give you yours. What kind of king do *you* want to have? And whose kingdom do you want to live in?

We might think that answer is pretty obvious. And it may seem that way. But I suspect when it actually comes to our lives and how we live and the daily choices we make, it might not

be as simple as we think. After all, when we look at ourselves in the midst of this world, which kingdom are we truly choosing?

I look at the kind of things I spend my time worrying about. I suspect you do much of the same. I look at the sorts of things that I get angry or argue. I look at the reasons why I make decisions in my life, consumed with self-interest and self-preservation. And I think no matter who you are, we have all in some way made it our goal in life to achieve “success.”

We want the security, perhaps even the power, of being successful. Whether it’s a certain title, or a certain office, or a certain kind of family, or a certain income, or a certain level of health. And this is the message that the kingdoms of this world convince us of. We have drilled into us daily in every TV commercial and internet ad that the goal is to get better, and that we deserve better. That we should climb the ladder and get to the top of the heap.

Even some so-called Christians will tell you that’s what God wants for your life: health, wealth, and prosperity. That’s it’s our right, and it’s what we deserve. And then, sometimes when we get it, we act like we *do* deserve it. And we’ll do anything in our power to keep it, to keep our place, to keep our power, to keep our life exactly the way we want it. We defy anyone to take it from us, even God. But at the top of that kingdom is only death. One way or another, it will consume us. And the façade of success will eventually fall away.

What Jesus comes to bring is an entirely different kind of kingdom. One lived out in a completely different kind of way. A way of repentance, self-denial, sacrifice, and putting others first always. A way not of success, but of hardship, persecution, and eventually death. It’s a way where we call the embarrassing deaths of John... and Jesus, the Gospel of the Lord.

But as Jesus demonstrates, his kingdom is founded upon the King who sacrifices his all, so that you may receive the greatest benefits eternally. And perhaps counter-intuitively, and maybe even shockingly, being a part of his kingdom where you may lose all for Christ’s sake, means you will gain more than anything any other kingdom of this world can offer. Because the kingdom of Herod, the kingdom of rulers and powers and authorities of this world, they can’t touch the kingdom that Jesus brings.

To demonstrate this, in chapter 6, Mark immediately follows up this banquet of Herod with another banquet of sorts. This will be our Gospel next week. It’s a banquet hosted by Jesus. And again, the contrast between Herod and Jesus couldn’t be more stark. Right after the disciples come back from proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus the King, sits down with five thousand men, plus women and children, in order to feed them.

Jesus saw that the people were like sheep without a shepherd. The disciples say, “It’s not our problem – send them off to go buy their own food. We don’t want to deal with them.” But Jesus makes it clear, they will be provided for, and they will be given what they need.

And then he goes on to do what God has always done for His people out of His goodness and mercy: Jesus provides for their needs simply because they are His people. We are cared for in ways that we don’t deserve, and yet in ways that can’t help but flow from the life-giving King. This is the kingdom where you live. This is the king that you have. Live in his life, and live in His kingdom. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.