

How sordid. How tragic. How petty. It's all here in Mark 6 where we learn to our shock and sadness that the first great New Testament gospel herald, John the Baptist himself, was done in because of a boozy promise made by a womanizing older man who had been enchanted by a little girl who did a dance for him and his party companions.

Herod found himself oddly drawn to John's words, but he kept his hands off of John the Baptist out of fear of a Jewish reprisal. Herod seals John's fate all because of a moment of weakness in which he promises to give a young girl just about anything she wants.

I'd note that the Greek word used to describe this young girl (Herodias's daughter) is the same word that Mark uses to describe Jairus' daughter, who we are told is 12 years old: according to this culture, she is not a woman who has come of age, but a child. We are not told that the men are filled with lust as they watch her dance, but also we are not told that they weren't. All we know is that 'she pleased Herod and his guests.' Make of it what you will.

I wrestle with how can it be that so vital a figure in salvation history gets murdered on account of a vengeful woman at a dinner party? This is no glorious martyrdom. This is not Stephen testifying to God's grace and seeing Jesus just before the fatal stone strikes him in the head. This is a petty, silent beheading in a prison cell, as swiftly enacted as it was maniacally arranged.

Context may be helpful in unpacking the layers of Mark's story: John the Baptist was probably the only figure who had the courage (and the audacity) to stand up to Herod Antipas. This is not the Herod who was around when Jesus was born (that was Herod the Great). This is his son (who wasn't actually a king at all, but a tetrarch - the ruler of the district of Galilee.) This also isn't the Herod that shows up in the Book of Acts

who killed James, either (that was Herod Agrippa, also known as King Herod). But what this middle Herod, Herod Antipas, shared in common with those other two was a real nasty streak of immorality, self-aggrandizement, and corruption.

He had been married originally to a Nabataean princess whom he later dumped in favor of marrying his brother's wife, Herodias (who incidentally is his father's granddaughter by another woman...making Herodias Herod's niece). So even though it made him guilty of multiple sins (adultery and incest among them) and even though it angered his father-in-law, the king of the Nabataeans (to whom Herod's first wife fled in humiliation)—and even though this later led to a military conflict with the Nabataeans in which Herod was roundly defeated and embarrassed—nevertheless Herod married Herodias, and no one except John the Baptist had the moral fortitude to point out how wrong it was.

Had John just stuck to baptisms and some harsh pronouncements about the Pharisees and such, he would have been OK. But John landed in prison because he had the temerity to question the morality of Herod the Tetrarch. As has too often been the case in history, the powers that be are content to regard religion as a kind of hobby that seems to satisfy certain needs people have. And so long as it stays in the realm of "hobby," religion and the people who practice it are left alone. But once those in power begin to feel threatened by those who practice their religion, things can get ugly pretty quickly.

So John questioned the king's morality, even rebuking him for his deeds. This landed him in prison. But then, as though to prove John right that it's both wrong and foolish to cross certain moral boundary lines, Herodias' behind the scenes entangles both her husband/uncle and an innocent little girl (his great-niece/step-daughter), leading to John's execution. A celebration feast, with its climax of flesh and blood, served up on a platter.

If you're ever in the mood for a vignette of evil, tawdriness, and utter disregard for the miracles of life and love, you could hardly do better than this text.

So where is the Good News to be found?

At this point in the Gospel, we're faced with an undeniable reality that the world is locked in cycles of death and destruction, power-grabbing and suffering, elitism and subjugation, privilege and oppression. For many, religion has been a game, a curiosity, an inconvenience ... a hobby.

Something has to break through to this world. Something has to snap these destructive cycles. Something has to narrate a different story and point in a different direction.

The Lectionary does us a disservice by stopping at the end of Mark's flashback. This story is a set-up and foil for the bigger story Mark is telling. What follows immediately after this vignette is the feeding of the 5,000 ~ a glimpse of restored humanity, of community and abundance, of shared responsibility and the needs of *all* being met with *plenty left over*. And it is a foreshadowing of the resurrection and full restoration of the created order.

Mark goes on to illustrate an alternative: where the banquets of empire are feasts of fear, scarcity, and death, the followers of Jesus partake in **The Feast** of love, abundance, and life!

The motif of John's head on a platter is so powerful in its imagery that it overshadows everything else. The platter causes all other important images in the narrative – the celebration gathering, the oath, the food, and the dance – to converge.” Where the story begins with a young girl dancing, it ends with her bringing to her step-father the head on a platter in front of a crowd of blood-thirsty aristocrats. This is the inverse of salvation history. The imagery of this pawn of a girl (who has been a feast for the eyes of the rich and powerful, and a minion for her mother)

holding this platter at the banquet is the antithesis of the message of the gospel. It is the formulation of what some scholars have called an anti-Eucharist.

It is in stark contrast to the following story of the feeding of the five-thousand (6:3-34). Herod Antipas lives in a world of power and authority, where he can make promises based on the belief that he can get anything he wants by doing anything he wants to anyone he wants. Only a select few are invited, consisting of those who must gain favor with “the king” in order to be recognized. It is a feast of scarcity and greed. Another example of how those who are in power (lacking a moral code) use manipulation and intimidation and violence to protect themselves from the fear of those who challenge their right to rule.

On the other hand, the feeding of the multitude offers wholeness to those who are broken, healing to those who are sick, and sustenance to those who are hungry. It is a feast of radical inclusion. Those who were excluded, broken, and humiliated find healing and hope in Jesus, a common Galilean tradesman. It is a feast of hope and abundance. Those who begin believing there will not be enough discover that there is more than enough, with more left over at the end than they thought they had in the beginning (6: 42-44).

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Rather than a world where people are envious of each other’s power or privilege or possessions, Jesus invites those who participate the chance to see that there is more than enough for the wellbeing of everyone. While the world is spinning out of control, people who have lost their

innocence, their health, their direction, their *hope* can come together to find healing and wholeness and to be restored to fulness of life.

It happened when the 5,000 were fed, and it happens each Sunday, right here. All are welcome. And there is more than enough.

When the faithful followers of Jesus gather, they actively choose not to practice their religious hobbies, but rather choose to participate in the Reign of God in opposition to the reign of the rulers of this world. We gather under the banner, not of land or leader, but under that banner of Jesus the Christ. It is the choice of freedom over fear, compassion over coercion, inclusion over exclusion.

Central to who we are as children of a living God, and always before us, is the invitation to The Feast of love, abundance, and life!