

Mark 6:14-29 Year B  
July 15, 2018

Martin Luther once said something to the effect that we are to squeeze a Bible passage until it yields good news. If that is the case, it would seem that our gospel text today is perfect to put Luther's theory to the test. Yet upon reading this passage time and time again this week I am not sure I was able to squeeze out of it even the tiniest drop of good news. In fact, I somewhat wrestled with why the weekly lectionary even includes such a passage full of hostility, hatred, power, fame, and a gruesome death.

We first learn of John's arrest in 1:14-15, "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'" We hear nothing further until our text today in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter, immediately following Jesus' sending of the disciples into the world to tell the world to repent of its sin and turn to God. Not easy work Jesus sent those first disciples out to do. Not easy work Jesus continues us to go out and do. Those disciples were rejected and we too will be rejected.

We are told Herod does hear the news about Jesus. Perhaps from the disciples being sent out or perhaps from the growing popularity of Jesus and the

many folks who were going out to follow him who heard a new message that proclaimed salvation for all people who repent of their sins and turn to God. A new message that spoke not out of a state of fear and the control of power at any and all cost but rather a message that spoke from a place of love, compassion, and well-being for all whom God had created.

It's no wonder Herod equates these stories he is hearing as the work of John the Baptist. It's eerily similar to what we know about John the Baptist who came to preach a call to repentance. Whom vast crowds flocked to in the wilderness to be baptized by the fire of the Spirit. And so Herod wonders, could John, whom I beheaded, have been raised from the dead?

Mark then goes on, in great detail, to take the reader back in time to exactly how John was beheaded. In the shortest of the 4 gospels in which, as we know Mark seems always urgent in the immediacy of telling the good news of Jesus Christ, I find it so interesting how Mark almost abruptly slows things down and gives so much space to this gruesome story. 16 verses, which in the brevity of this gospel could be equated to a whole chapter in the other 3. What's the deal Mark? Why spend so much time on a passage in which Jesus doesn't even show up, which is a rarity in this gospel. The only other 2 scenes this occurs is the

Golgotha plot in chapter 14 and the discovery of the empty tomb in the concluding 8 verses of this gospel.

One thing that will help us along is to understand the context within which Mark wrote his gospel. Of the four gospels Mark's is generally thought to have been the earliest to be penned. Most scholars date the writing of Mark to the period around 66 CE and 70 CE (approximately 40 years after Christ's death). Mark would have been writing in a time when the world as he knew was seemingly coming unraveled at the seams. The nightly news, had there been one, would have been full of awful stories of death, persecution, and war. The culminating story would have been the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE by the hands of the political tyrant of his day, Rome. Mark and the young church are most certainly living in a time of great angst, fear, and the very real threat of martyrdom.

They live in a world in which powers of authority rule in a way that runs counter to God's ways. A world in which prophetic voices that call unjust rulers to repentance and to turn to God will indeed be met with resistance. This is what those first disciples Jesus sent out were called to do and this is what the community Mark was writing to also was called to do. Living into the reality of

that calling may indeed come with a cost just as John encountered and just as Jesus encountered.

There is also another reason Mark may spend so much time telling this text.

Because it really is a foreshadowing of what is to come. C. Clifton Black points out:

“The flashback is a flashforward. . . . Herod foreshadows Pilate in the same way that John presages Jesus (1:1-15; 9:9-13; 11:27-33). The two prefects are nominally in charge. Like Antipas, Pilate is amazed (6:20; 15:5) by circumstances surrounding an innocent prisoner (6:17, 20; 15:1, 14a), swept up in events that fast spin out of his control (6:21-25; 15:6-13), and unable to back down after being publicly outmaneuvered (6:26-27; 15:15). Like John, Jesus is passive in his final hours (6:14-19; 15:1-39), faces with integrity his moment of truth (6:21: *hemeras eukairou*, “an opportunity came”; 12:2: *to kairo*, “the season came”), and is executed by hideous capital punishment (6:27-28; 15:24-27), dying to placate those he offends (6:19, 25; 15:10-14). John’s disciples give their teacher a proper burial (6:29).” What will become of the twelve after Jesus’ death (14:27, 50-52; 15:40-47)”<sup>1</sup>

Despite the twelves failure to properly bury Jesus we know he does indeed receive a proper burial just as John did. Mark is always pointing to Jesus and this story is like a neon sign for Mark’s audience directing them back to the cross. Reminding them that their resistance to forces that defy God’s kingdom will indeed cause them a heavy cross to bear. But, here is the promise, they will not bear it alone. Jesus has borne the ultimate cross upon his shoulders and here in lies the good news this text points us toward. It is a Good Friday passage that ultimately turns us to the Easter Sunday and the promise of resurrection. Power, corruption, control,

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<sup>1</sup> C. Clifton Black; commentary on this passage from [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

brutality, injustice, and death will not have the final say. God will. Life will prevail. Justice will reign. Jesus will live and so too will all who faithfully follow him.

And lastly, there is one other interest of note in Mark's lengthy retelling of this story. There are two stories of great banquets and feasts in this gospel. Today's passage is the first and it undoubtedly reveals the feast of a wicked ruler caught up in the lust and greed to remain in power and control. A banquet that ends in death. This clearly is not an image of the kingdom Jesus ushers in. But what is an image of that kingdom is the banquet Mark gives us immediately following this heinous one. It is the feast in which thousands flock to Jesus to hear the good news he proclaims. To be healed of all that torments their aching bodies and souls and to be fed by the powerful words he preaches given to him under the authority of his Father. Indeed, they do come hungry – physically – and there is but minimal amounts of food. Yet, in this kingdom all are fed. There is an abundance. All are fed and all are welcome. This is a banquet of love and life. This is a banquet of salvation.

Perhaps, it is challenging to find the good news in this passage and to squeeze out any remnant of it. While it clearly is a text of discipleship, of the risks and costs that come with confronting the forces, powers, and authorities of the day who run counter to the kingdom of God Jesus reveals, it also is a text that ever

moves us to look to the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter. Our eyes ever set on the work of God in the world. Transforming death into life and revealing a story of love for the world to hear.