

8 Pentecost B, Proper 10. Mark 6:14-29. July 15, 2018.

I can't think of another passage of scripture that so vividly portrays what one philosopher called the "banality of evil." That author had gone to cover the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann and was stunned to find not a monster foaming at the mouth with hatred, but a boring ambitious nerdy-looking bureaucrat. Herod is not an unambiguously evil man. He is not some supervillain plotting to blow up the world or hell-bent on destroying the good wherever he finds it. He is a vulgarian. He is weak and cowardly and lustful and haunted. He makes the relatively common mistake of thinking that appetite is justification, and this mistake leads him step by tiny step to moral oblivion. He kills John the Baptist not out of hatred or misinterpreted justice or zeal for some incompatible good, but because it would be embarrassing not to.

In this passage he's throwing himself a birthday party. He's the ruler of Galilee and stocks his birthday party with the most powerful people he knows. There's already a sadness here, that the most powerful man in town needs to bolster his power by surrounding himself with as many not-quite-as-powerful people as he can. I believe that the term is fragile masculinity. Herod is sometimes erroneously called a king, but in the grand scheme of the Roman Empire, he wasn't far off from a middle manager. He had bosses who had bosses who had bosses. John the Baptist has not been invited to the party. He's downstairs in the dungeons, where he's been imprisoned for taking a vocally traditionalist line on the morality of Herod's marriage to his former sister-in-law, who almost shares his name.

It could be a little confusing, so let me try to get us some clarity. Herod is the ruler of Galilee, the northern part of Israel where Jesus is from. He has married a woman Mark calls Herodias, who was probably his niece and had been married to Herod's brother. Herodias, the wife/former-sister-in-law/niece has a daughter that we have remembered as Salome, but our translation of a difficult passage of Mark also calls Herodias, which somehow adds an extra layer of ickiness to the whole situation. John has a following, and his condemnation of this family arrangement is dangerous. Herodias the wife and mother wants Herod to kill him, but Herod can't bring himself to do it. He imprisons the prophet, but can't bear to shut him up. And so he regularly goes down to the dungeons to sit and listen, perplexed but somehow also pleased: as we often are when we encounter unexpected truth.

And then comes the birthday party. It isn't the kind of party you'd invite John the Baptist or Jesus to. We can imagine the wine spilling, the juice from meat dripping down unshaven chins, and the men leering at this girl who has inexplicably been sent out to entertain the guests. Herod's pleasure in the dance is particularly creepy, but is only a couple steps on from leaving his own wife to marry his brother's wife, where again appetite was its own justification. His intemperate pleasure leads to an immoderate response, as he offers the girl up to half of his kingdom as payment for a dance. And then, when the viciousness of her request shakes him almost to his senses, he doesn't have the courage to go back on his word and lose face to save a man's life. Herod's lust leads him to betrayal and foolishness and his cowardice finally leads him to the moral catastrophe of murder.

Now I'm actually not intending to preach a moralistic sermon against the petty vulgar sins of Herod. And, if we want, we can all make the obvious parallels to our own rulers and in general the vulgarity and pettiness of people who have power over us. But I think it's much more interesting to look not at what Herod shows us about our rulers, but what he might show us about ourselves. The bite of this story is that the relatively mundane, if grimy, sins Herod has balanced all his life suddenly add up to the spectacular evil of murdering John the Baptist. He makes small deals with wickedness over and over again until he finally decidedly loses, as he must. He compromises with evil until he has nothing left, and lacks the moral fortitude to admit that he's made a stupid offer and will not hold to it. Step by step by step to hell. It reminds me of a passage from hometown boy made good Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, where a guy gets asked how he went bankrupt and he says "Two ways. Gradually, and then suddenly."

I think there's a truth to this. We all make deals with evil. We all think that we can extract a little more life by compromising with the forces that make for death. And then one day we find that in these deals that we have embraced with enthusiasm or distaste, we have always lost. And suddenly we find ourselves doing the equivalent of ordering a person's death. Suddenly we find ourselves in a situation where every option is a disaster.

Well, that's the bad news. Notice that this is one of the very few passages in Mark where neither Jesus nor his disciples actually appear. Herod's party is a place where the gospel has been locked in a dungeon in the basement. It is a place where truth is not welcome and it makes us feel claustrophobic with its overripe venality and all the windows shut against the Spirit. But this passage is the centerpiece of a triptych, surrounded by the story we heard last week and the story we'll read next week, of Jesus sending out the disciples to preach the gospel and of them coming back to report on how it went.

Especially in the summer, I don't expect you to remember what the disciples did on their travels. But Mark tells us that the content of their preaching was one word: repent. In other words, this gross story of lechery and cowardice is surrounded in the gospel by a narrative of repentance. Herod is here to show us what repentance can save us from. He was unable to repent of his stupid promise to his dancing stepdaughter and so he lives his entire sad life haunted by the man he killed. But he's done us the great favor of making repentance feel like a breath of fresh air, like throwing open the windows and taking a deep breath, like a great joy. Like something that we might dance towards, dancing of course like David and not like Salome. When we repent we are not just forgiven but changed, made by God's love into people who can share God's love. And that indeed is something worth dancing about. Amen.