



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

July 15, 2018

“The Death of John the Baptist”

(Mark 6:14-29)

Rev. David K. Groth

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: O Lord, You granted Your prophets strength to resist the temptations of the devil and courage to proclaim repentance. Give us pure hearts and minds to follow Your Son faithfully even into suffering and death; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

So who is the Herod mentioned in our text? He is not the one who ordered the slaughter of the infant boys in Bethlehem. That was his father, Herod the Great. This is son, Herod Antipas, governor of Galilee, a puppet of the Roman Empire. Herod wants people to call him “king”, but Rome really isn’t impressed with this man and doesn’t want him running around calling himself “king”. Rome lets him have the word “Tetrarch”, much like our word “governor.”

Herod has shed innocent blood and it’s haunting him. Historians tell us it all started when Herod Antipas visits his brother in Rome by the name of Herod Philip. Philip is married to a strong and attractive woman named Herodias. Antipas becomes obsessed with his sister-in-law Herodias and convinces her to divorce her husband (his brother) Philip and come back to Galilee to be his queen, (or, at least the governor’s wife). In turn, Antipas divorces his own wife, the daughter of the king of Petra and throws her out onto the streets. (By the way this, of course, peeves the king of Petra, who promptly declares war on Galilee. The armies of Herod take a beating. (Not just John the Baptist, *many people* end up losing their lives because of this relationship between Herod Antipas and Herodias.) (It’s starting to sound like the summary of an Italian opera!) In any event, all this divorcing and remarrying doesn’t sit well with Jewish law. So here comes John the Baptist and he’s one of those guys who fears no one, always says what he’s thinking, and what he’s thinking now is that Herod is a shameful disgrace who needs to repent. Of course, Herod thinks that’s no way to speak of your king, and so he has John promptly arrested.

Normally that would be the end of it and John would waste away in Herod’s prison. But Herodias, Herod’s new wife, thinks imprisonment is way too lenient. She’s still furious that John would dare judge them. And she’s a strong headed one; she’s not going to let go of this. She’s been nursing this grudge and wants

John dead. However, she can't convince her husband. V. 20: "For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man." Moreover, Matthew tells us Herod was afraid of John's large following. He knows if he puts John to death, the first thing the crowds will do is demand from Rome a new Tetrarch. Second, they might even revolt, and the last thing Rome wants is the expense of having to come to Herod's rescue. There's one more reason Herod doesn't execute John. Verse 20, "Whenever Herod listened to John, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly." So Herod is protecting John from his wife's seething anger.

By the way, these are all real people, living real lives in real places, well documented by historians and archaeologists. They are wonderfully complex people, capable of good and evil. This is not mythology. This is history. Salome, the dancing girl in this text, for example, would one day marry a man named Aristobulus, who would become tetrarch of Chalcus (part of present day Syria). A few ancient coins with portraits of Aristobulus and Salome have been found. Moreover, one of the quirks historians know about Herod Antipas is that he loved to throw extravagant parties; he had the gift of hospitality. It's one of these parties that does John the Baptist in.

To this party Herod has invited military commanders, his advisors and other leading men from Galilee. There's a lot of testosterone in that room. The party starts quiet, but the booze is flowing and they're smoking Cuban cigars and throwing dice. The humor is course; the laughter is ear splitting.

Into that saunters Herod's lovely new step-daughter. Her name is Salome. She's one of the bad girls of the Bible . . . and in art history. Artists portray her as a smoldering, sultry young woman who wears little clothing, but lots of jewelry in strategic places. As it happens, she's also a whiz at dancing, and she rips off a little number for Herod and his friends. The nature of the dance is left to our imagination, but we know that solo dances back then were normally the art of prostitutes. This is not a nice woman, but is fully

aware of her powers to charm and seduce. The men in the room are eating it up and their eyes have sprouted hands. Herod is particularly enthralled. It all certainly confirms my grandfather's suspicion about all forms of dance. He liked to say, "Vertical actions for horizontal intentions!"

In any event, in that culture, one of the ways to show your feathers and display your wealth was through extravagant gifts to entertainers. So Herod promises to give her anything she wants, up to half his kingdom. Surely, it's hyperbole. He's exaggerating. But the message is clear; he wants to give her something big. It's ill-advised and reckless, but my guess is he lost his inhibitions about three martinis earlier. Salome isn't sure what she should ask for. What's really appropriate when it's your new step-dad? She asks her mom about it. Herodias knows exactly what's appropriate. "The head of John" she snaps, served on a platter . . . as in now.

Herod is trapped. He doesn't want to execute John, but all those guys heard the oath, and he doesn't want to lose face before them, or have them think of him as a chicken. Clearly, he's also still trying to impress his new family, Herodias and Salome. So, he gives the word and within minutes John is kneeling before the executioner.

Well, what can we learn from all this? Why is this passage important?

First this: Jesus loved John the Baptist. Remember what he said? "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John" (Mt. 11:11). Those are high grades coming from the mouth of God's Son. And yet look what happened to John! God chose not to interfere with the course of these events. He could have. A well-placed flu bug, or even slightly spoiled fish for lunch would have put the kibosh on Salome's dancing. But in his wisdom, God chose not to interfere. He doesn't send a flu bug. He doesn't send an angel to break open the prison doors. He doesn't harden Herod's resolve to act justly. Instead, a good man loses his life because a foolish man makes a reckless oath. It seems so senseless and

tragic. Why God? It's a question you and I ask when we come across the senseless and tragic. "Why God? Why didn't you do something? You could have stopped this. Why did you choose not to?" Sometimes we might even speculate. "Maybe he or she or they had it coming." Or, "Maybe God doesn't really care, doesn't want to get involved in our messiness." Some even think the presence of senseless evil disproves the existence of God.

Scripture doesn't satisfy all our questions about suffering, nor does it invite us to speculate. Herod orders that John should be beheaded. Does this mean God loves John any less? I don't think so. Does it mean God is at fault for John's death? No. We don't hang a man for what he hasn't done! We don't blame God for man's wickedness.

Ever since Genesis three, bad men and women make bad decisions. Ever since Genesis three, the earth groans and quakes and here and there gets dry and fiery and in other places gets saturated and flooded. In a fallen world, bad things happen to good people, and when they do, often the most faithful thing to do is hold your tongue, for "When words are many, sin is not absent" (Prov. 10:19). Lamentations 3, "It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD". If we must speak, we don't speculate, but confess only what we know with a certainty: that God is good and just and powerful. He desires to save, not to condemn. He is merciful and wants us to have mercy. And most importantly, he loves those involved, because he loves his whole creation. We can't sort it all out, but that's the truth of it according to Scripture.

What else? Jesus said there is none greater than John. What made him great? Did you notice John is the only one in this text who isn't worried about the opinions of others? He's the only one who is more concerned about what is right in God's sight. Think of it.

- Herod is worried about appeasing and impressing his new wife and step-daughter. He's also worried about saving face before all those men.

- Those men in the room don't want to intervene because they're worried about what Herod might say or do to them if they did.
- Herodias can't stand the thought of anyone thinking that her sweet and loving relationship with Herod Antipas could be wrong, even if it did cause a couple of divorces, a broken family, and a small war.
- The executioner is just doing his job and following orders and doesn't want trouble with the boss.
- Salome is more concerned about what her mom wants than what God wants. She also wants to impress her new step-dad. (Hopefully she learned *never* to ask her mother's advice again . . . about anything.)

The point is, everyone in that room is worried about what others might think. Only John is concerned about the judgment of God. He feared God more than man.

Would that God would lend us some of John's grit and nerve! As it is, you and I are more like Herod, afraid of losing face, or like the men in the room, not wanting to get involved, not wanting to cross the boss. More like Herodias, thinking that what matters most is that others never judge us. More like Salome, wanting to impress others, even at the expense of our integrity. Unlike John the Baptist, we lose our courage, our resolve. We go mute. We give the thumbs up to that which is bad or crass or immoral and a thumbs down to that which is good and right but no longer fashionable. What God really needs is for his people to think for themselves rather than let the culture do the thinking for them, to confess the truth rather than compromising the truth.

What else made John great? Have you ever thought about how his life parallels that of Jesus? Think about it. Both John the Baptist and Jesus share a miraculous conception. Both have enemies in high places. Both stand up for the truth even though it costs them their lives. Both

are innocent. Both are ultimately condemned by men who really don't want to do it but surrender to the pressure of others. And both, at the end, come face to face with Herod Antipas.

Remember how it happened? When Pontius Pilate learned Jesus was a Galilean and thus under Herod's jurisdiction, he passed that hot potato off to Herod. Luke tells us Pilate and Herod couldn't stand each other (Lk. 23:12), so maybe this was Pilate's way of needling Herod. But Herod was actually glad to see Jesus. He wanted to see Jesus do some of his magic, but Jesus doesn't cooperate. Well that's no way to treat a king, so Herod decides to have a little fun with him. He has his soldiers rough him up a bit, and then dresses Jesus up in one of his fanciest tetrarch outfits and sends him back to Pilate. Pilate shares the same sense of humor and finds the joke funny. Luke tells us from then on Herod and Pilate became good friends.

Want to know what became of Herod and Herodias? 1st century historian Josephus tells us. He says Herodias kept nagging Herod to go to Rome and insist that the emperor make him a king with all the rights and honors due a king. (Of course, that would make her a queen.) Herod doesn't think it's a good idea. Josephus writes, "He had a suspicion of the trouble he should have at Rome" (Josephus, p. 389), but once again, Herod acquiesces to her. They set sail for Rome and eventually gain an audience with Emperor Caius himself. Long story short: Herod should have followed his instincts. The emperor not only did not make Herod a king, but actually took away his reign as tetrarch, ordered Herod's wealth be given to his successor, and banished both of them to Gaul. (That's where Rome sent many who fell from favor.) We can't be sure, but there's some evidence Pilate eventually ended up there too. One wonders if those two ever shook hands in Gaul, and, if they did, how much innocent blood oozed from between their palms.

Every chance you get, take a stand for what is good, what is right and what is true. Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves. Do justice. Love mercy. And walk

humbly with your God. And when you miss the mark, run to the mercy and grace and forgiveness and love of your Savior Jesus. Don't walk. Don't drag your feet. Run.

And when your life intersects with the tragic and the senseless, don't say too much. Just hold on for dear life to that which is certain: that God is good and just and powerful. He desires to save, not to condemn. He is merciful and wants us to have mercy. And most importantly, he loves you, has purchased and won you with his own blood, and will never, ever let go of you. Amen.