

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“The Death of John the Baptist”

Rev. David K. Groth

July 11, 2021

Mark 6:14-29

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 and convinces her to divorce her husband and come back to Galilee to be his wife. In the meantime, Antipas divorces his own wife and throws her out to prepare the way for Herodias. All this divorcing and remarrying doesn't sit well with Jewish law. So here comes John the Baptist who fears no one and 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 to him, so he promptly has John arrested.

Normally, that would be the end of it and John would waste away in Herod's prison. But Herodias is still nursing a grudge against John and she thinks imprisonment is way to lenient.

One of the things historians know about Herod Antipas is he loved to throw extravagant parties. To this particular party celebrating his own birthday, Herod invites his military commanders, advisors and other leading men from Galilee. There's a lot of testosterone in that room. The booze is flowing, the humor is coarse and the laughter is ear splitting.

Into that saunters Herod's lovely new stepdaughter named Salome. As a bizarre sort of birthday present for her new stepfather, she performs a dance before 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 young woman, but she is fully aware of her powers to seduce and charm. The men are entranced. Herod is particularly impressed. In that culture, one way to display your wealth was through extravagant gifts to entertainers. So, Herod promises 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 significant. It's ill-advised and reckless, but my guess is he lost his inhibitions just after the second or third Brandy Old Fashioned. Salome isn't sure what to ask for, so she asks for advice from her mom. Herodias, still nursing her grudge, knows exactly what's appropriate: “The head of John” she snaps, “on a platter.” So, John is soon kneeling before his executioner.

The death of John seems such a waste, so pointless and unnecessary, the result of a drunken and hasty oath to a young temptress. We might be tempted to ask, “Why? What good ever came of it?” At least when Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and then imprisoned unjustly in Egypt, we learn why: God was putting Joseph in a position to save many lives through the accumulation of grain against the coming famine. But the execution of John offers no such consolation. There's no clear good that comes of it. So, why didn't God stop it from happening? After all, remember what Jesus said about John the Baptist? “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 God allowed to happen to John! It doesn't add up. On the surface, at least, it seems senseless, and when suffering is senseless, we start asking “Why?”

Why did she get cancer? Why did the building collapse? Why was this pandemic necessary, or this car wreck? Tucked away in the assumption is if the suffering appears pointless to me, then it must *be* pointless. But does that really make sense? Just because we cannot see or imagine a good reason for why God allows evil and suffering, does that mean there *can* be no good reason? Surely God has thoughts and plans that you and I are not privy to and could not understand even if we were. Isaiah 55, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (v. 8-9).

Again, thinking back to Joseph: If his brothers had never sold him off into slavery, Joseph would have spent his life tending sheep and goats. He would never have become such a powerful agent of good for others, nor would we have that remarkable story of forgiveness. “You meant it for evil” Joseph told his brothers. “God meant it for good.”

I suspect there came a time in Joseph's life when he looked back and was even grateful for that suffering. Not that he would want to go through it again, but he came out of it a better man than when he went in. As Paul wrote, “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and

character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame” (Rom. 5:3). James writes, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness . . . that you may be complete, lacking in nothing” (1:2).

There are times, however, when we cannot even imagine any good coming from suffering, and the idea of pointless suffering offends us. But that fact alone, that we think we should be able to understand God’s reasons for suffering exposes our assumption that God isn’t much smarter than we are, or that we are about as smart as He is. Said another way, to think we should always be able to understand why God allows suffering . . . that’s called idolatry.

Still, we puff ourselves up with self-righteousness and plop ourselves down in a judgment seat over God. “Why did you let it happen? Why didn’t you do something? Why did you watch her die?” Often with those questions, we’re not really interested in answers. We’re more interested in demanding God to justify himself before us.

Remember how Job lost everything? Remember how he suffered, and how Job and his friends questioned why God let it happen. For most of the book God is silent, but in chapter 38, the Lord finally speaks. “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself. Now I’m going to question **you**. Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me if you understand. Surely you know!” (Job 38:1ff). The Lord overwhelms Job with a long string of questions, dozens of them. The idea is that the answer to the question of suffering is more complex than we could ever understand. We’re going to have to trust Him on that. Don’t accuse Him of evil or injustice or indifference or impotence. Don’t you lose another day being bitter toward God because of suffering. Instead, turn your questions of why into questions of how. How might God use this to glorify himself? How might God use my weakness to display His power? How might God use my grief to display His grace? How might God use this chaos to help me walk by faith and not by sight? How might God use an untimely death to stir the hearts of others?

Of course, God never promised that His people would not suffer. Jesus said, “You will be hated because of me” (Mk. 13:13) and Psalm 34 says, “Many are the afflictions of the righteous” (v. 19). But suffering does give us ample opportunities to testify to the hope we have in Christ. There’s a certain street cred that sufferers have when we point to Jesus as our hope. The Christian witness is never stronger than when we’re suffering.

Finally, a person might say, “So what? I’m still angry. All this doesn’t get the Christian God off the hook for the world’s evil and suffering!” In response I would simply say the Christian God came to earth to put himself *on* the hook of human suffering. Jesus didn’t walk away from it. He willingly entered into it, to bear it for us and for our salvation. No man has experienced anything like the suffering He did. He was hated and betrayed. His trial was unfair and the verdict unjust. He was tortured and then executed in the cruelest of ways. And it wasn’t just suffering at the hands of men. It was for the sin of all mankind, past, present and future that he suffered.

Moreover, remember who He is. If a co-worker turns on you and criticizes and condemns you, it’s painful. If your spouse does that, it’s qualitatively more painful. If your parent does this to you when you’re still a child, the psychological damage is immeasurably worse. We cannot fathom, however, what it meant for Jesus to lose the infinite love of the Father that Jesus had from all eternity. But that’s what happened on the cross. No longer beloved Son, just guilty of all sin and therefore on the receiving end of the white-hot wrath of the Father. Why? “He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him” (Is. 53:5).

One last thing. In our text, the bizarre family dynamics and the drinks and the desire and the dancing all swirl together and end with the head of John the Baptist on a platter. It’s almost not fit for polite conversation, let alone for the Word of God. But that’s just the point. There are things about **our** lives that are not fit for polite conversation. Things like the DUI or the hate-filled divorce or the images, late at night, which play across your computer screen. This story about John the Baptist is one of those things. It shows just how very real the mess of sin can be in your life and mine, as well as the consequences and chaos.

But God has come to save His people from sin, real sin. And real sin is not the stuff of polite conversation. Herod’s tale is a sordid one, for sure, but so is mine and so is yours. Apart from the constraints God has put on us, there would be no end to the evil we would do. Yet the Christian faith is about God loving us nonetheless and sending His Son to atone for that sin on the cross, to forgive us and release us from the horrible guilt and shame we feel because of it. The Christian faith is not a set of dogmas we sign on to, a confirmation exam we pass. It’s about real people with real sin, and it’s about the experience of the sorrow for sin and the blessed grace of forgiveness through Jesus.

What happened to John is just a foreshadowing of what happened to Jesus, and what happened to Jesus is a foreshadowing of what will happen to His disciples. But God works in the midst of all this mess. Because of Christ, we can face suffering and hardships with hope and trust, rather than bitterness and despair. For Christ has suffered for you, and is even now preparing a home for you in heaven, where “He will wipe away every tear from your eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore.” Thanks be to God. Amen.