

**SERMON July 15, 2018**  
**Proper 10 Year B**

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In our opening collect prayer today, we asked that God's people might "know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them." Aside from the rather strange third-person wording, since we consider ourselves God's people and are asking this for ourselves, this prayer fits well with the gospel that we just heard. The story of Herod, his wife and the beheading of John the Baptist is a grisly and difficult one. It may serve partly as a cautionary tale for considering the things that we ought to do (and those we ought not do). I do think that there is more at stake in considering this story than "be careful what you promise" and "don't kill God's prophets." And, truly, I was not losing sleep about the beloved people of God at SPR on either of those two counts.

Here Mark gives us a complex tale that is more "reality" tale than "morality" tale. Mark's gospel is usually sparse and terse and yet, in this story, we get a complex characterization of Herod, his perplexed admiration and protection of John the Baptist who did not hesitate to publicly call out Herod and Herodias for their incestuous marriage. John does not hesitate to speak truth to power and it has consequences, like imprisonment, and even death. By telling the story of Herod and John the Baptist, Mark's Gospel points to both John's and Jesus' ministries as having intense political implications. "Political" not in the sense of parties and who to vote for, but political in the sense of challenging the human tendencies to greed for power and wealth and any temptation toward complacent acceptance of the dominant cultural assumption that money and might makes right. Mark does here remind us that such is the way of the world- that is a reality. It also helps to remember that Mark's Gospel was written in the aftermath of Roman destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Mark's stark realism here about Herod and the death of John the Baptist would resonate deeply for a community devastated by the Roman empire's violent oppression.

Martin Luther once said that preachers are to squeeze the scripture passage until it yields good news. With this Gospel passage, I find that squeezing out Good News requires us to consider it in relation to the rest of Mark's Gospel.

First, it is helpful to note where this story is situated. This story is placed directly after the passages in which Jesus sends the twelve out two by two to preach repentance, to heal the sick and cast out demons. Word of Jesus' and the disciples' activities reached Herod, who suspects that Jesus is John the Baptizer, whom he had beheaded, come back from the dead. Then comes the Gospel passage that we heard with the abrupt ending of John's disciples burying him. And with the next verse, Mark resumes the story of the apostles gathering back around Jesus and reporting to him all their preaching and healing activities. It's a weird juxtaposition: sending out the disciples followed by recounting the murder of John, followed then by the return of the disciples from their successful missions.

However, the link with sending out recalls a prior juxtaposition in Mark's Gospel. After Jesus received the baptism of John and spent forty days in the wilderness being tempted and ministered to by angels, the next step on his journey occurs "after John was arrested." (Mark 1:14-15). It is

after John was arrested that Jesus began proclaiming the kingdom of God come near and calling for repentance. And in like manner, after the death of the Baptist, the disciples are sent out to preach and teach God's kingdom and bring healing to the suffering. Just as after the death and resurrection of Jesus, his followers will be sent out to the whole world to proclaim God's nearness and healing to the world. That is one of the places where our lives, imperfect though they may be, are written in to the story.

This pattern continues, even in our lives. The human realities of violence, oppression, suffering and evil deeds continue and yet they are not the last word. Even in grim times, the good news that God loves us, calls us, and sends us out to the suffering world endures. John's prophetic voice announced, and Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection revealed, the compassion and unfathomable love of God for humankind. Even in our weakness and capacity for doing what we ought not to do and for not understanding what we ought to do, we are loved tenderly, and called as beloved people of God, and sent out as such to heal, to proclaim justice and mercy to the ends of the earth.

So even when the Temple has been destroyed, or you've lost a job, or your marriage is ending, or someone you love has died, the love of God in Christ Jesus remains constant. Thanks be to God.