

Searching for Life
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Mark 6:14-29
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Last week, we learned that Jesus, despite his abilities, and despite the good things he brought with him, was rejected in his own hometown. And we're told he sent his disciples out into the world, and they too found doors slamming in their faces. And there was lots of dust to shake off their feet.

This week, we learn of the cruel fate reserved for John: Despite his righteousness, he will not soften King Herod's heart. His ministry will end in a humiliating death. Mark's author spares no expense – we're treated to a scene that could just as easily be the plot of a *Game of Thrones* episode. And we're smart people. Our listening ears work. We can infer that Jesus and his disciples will meet a similar fate.

I wasn't on the committee that created the Revised Common Lectionary, the system of assigned readings for congregations to work their way through our scriptures in an orderly and shared fashion. Therefore, I wasn't able to stress my strenuous objection to the inclusion of passages like these. I don't find this to be an overly-valuable text in informing my faith.

Yes, the deaths of John, and Jesus, and the disciples are part of our story. They were on the wrong end of a brutal domination system. But they didn't let the stacked scales of justice prevent them from living out what God had called them to do.

For far too long, people have pushed an Atonement theology that imagines a God who concocts the beheading of a prophet and the crucifixion of a child as a cure-all for the sins of the world. I don't see it that way. I think John and Jesus and the disciples loved God. And they knew that loving God meant living into God's vision of the world, not Rome's. And as they lived into such a vision, a vision in total contradiction to Rome, their fate was sealed. Not because of God, but because of Rome.

Clarence Jordan reminds us that if we're going to march against the tumult of the bands – that is, if we're gonna tell Rome to go stick it – we'd better be prepared to meet the fiery furnace. Unlike the Three Young Men, neither John nor Jesus are offered a miraculous escape. But like those courageous men, they chose to believe that life is centered in God. And that a humiliating death will not, cannot be the final word. God's love will be the final word.

And of course, if we read this passage out of context, we can believe that there's a cross, a literal cross waiting for us, too. And maybe there is in the extreme cases. But I think for most of us, the cross or the death we'll bear is not so violent and perhaps not so dead. I think for most of us, the cross is dying to the things that prevent us from living. Can we die to our dependence on how others think about us? Can we die to our dependence on "security" – our checking account balance; our passport stamp; our entitlement to "more than," our ability to be THE decision-maker? Can we die to those things that give us value in Rome, and live for those things that give us value as God's children?

Perhaps that's where today's passage is helpful. Mark's gospel compares and contrasts the Kingdom of this world, Rome, with God's Kingdom.

Herod was king of his little part of Palestine, but he was only Jewish when it suited it him. And when he got sweet on Herodias, his brother's wife, the king part of him told the Jewish part of him that Leviticus wasn't all that important. John, of course, saw it differently, and he told Herod that marrying his sister-in-law was not only not a good idea, but it was also not in his spiritual interest. Mrs. Herod didn't like that. Herod didn't either, but there was something inside him, maybe his conscience that told him John was right. So he locked John in prison rather than kill him. In Rome, kings fear the truth.

So we get this wish-for-my-stepdaughter charade. And of course it backfires. And Herod, in front of all his friends, and in front of all he commands, is told he must bring John's head on a platter. And the king is grieved, because he is powerless to rectify this situation – how would it look to his adoring fans?!? Wouldn't it be uncomfortable to go back on his word? Who could possibly fix this? Apparently not the ruler of all. Not without some discomfort. Not to mention, here is a kingdom where the King's wife is so reduced and starved for independence and power, that she can only display her independence and power through acts of brutality. And she has a daughter who is forced to gain her mother's approval by playing into her mother's manipulative games.

Now contrast this with last week's text. Jesus, the center of God's in-breaking Kingdom, chooses to accept the rejection of his people in order to do what is right. And a woman suffering from hemorrhages, refuses to be bound to a system that prevents both her value and her healing. And disciples, in spite of rejection, in spite of doors slamming in their faces, perform acts of healing and exorcisms. This is the story of life. This is the story of a cross that bears fruit.

Here's another thing. We've already heard Mark's story. We live in a post-Easter reality. And that reality dulls the pain of John's story. We know it's not the end. And so we don't feel like we did after the Stark wedding. And we don't have to wait till next Sunday to find out what's next.

But imagine the earliest hearers and readers of the story. They hear that John's disciples retrieved and buried a headless body. Surely they braced themselves for an unhappy ending – Herod's cruelty will deter any further talk of this new kind of world where God makes a difference. Can you envision their delight, and their total surprise at what came next?

The next paragraph is not one of sorrow. John's death has born a new movement. After today's interlude, the disciples will tell Jesus the stories of their 2x2 experiences. And Jesus will feed five thousand men, and another ten thousand women and children who aren't mentioned. And a paragraph later, he'll walk on water. There is life!!!

And ten chapters from now, even after a gruesome crucifixion, faithful women, having buried a body, will find an empty tomb. And ellipsis (...), a pause if you will. And the believer will be left to ask, or left to faith: "Now what?"

Here's what the earliest believers faithed, and what I faith too: God's world isn't like Herod's. God can help us feed thousands. And God can help us walk on water. And God can work through people in forgotten places. And God's love is more pronounced, more lasting, more real than anything Rome can offer. God gives life. And God gives it abundantly. And we know and we faith such life because of the way John and Jesus and the disciples and all the saints that followed chose to live, even in death.

Revised Common Lectionary Committee, maybe I'll remove the strenuous from my objection. Amen.