

Amos 7:7-15
Psalm 85-8-13
Ephesians 1:3-14
Mark 6:14-29

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Make Herod Tremble

May the words of my mouth and the mediation of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

We're gluttons for meaning. Yearning for our worlds to make sense. Quick to create narratives and explanations in the absence of any. Working in pediatric oncology for over a decade as a chaplain, it was not at all unusual to hear a parent ponder if God gave their child cancer as a test of their faith, or to shake up their priorities as a way to get them to Mass more often. The first thing I thought was never the first thing I said.

And here you are, on a sweltering Sunday morning clobbered with a gruesome, blood-soaked text, a headless prophet, a young girl monstrously manipulated by her mother and exploited by a drunken king and his drunken friends.

It's disgusting; horrific at every level. Let's not forget the head served up on the platter belonged to the man who baptized Jesus. That baby, remember, who leaped in his mother, Elizabeth's, womb when Mary told her she was to bear the son of God? The prophet who was a mentor to Jesus in his early years.

If there is "good news" to be had in such a text, why wrap it in such a gruesome way? John the Baptist, who proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, and Jesus, the Messiah he proclaimed, were either tortured to death on the cross or decapitated. Both men stood for the same truths and were executed for it.

One feels a momentary kinship with those who are "spiritual not religious" except here we are, sitting in pews, preaching in a pulpit.

What is striking to me in the wrangling I've done with this text is how the inability to hear the truth can lead to violent destruction. It has a stiletto-like sharpness this political season.

John the Baptist was a truth teller. Herod had married his brother's wife, Herodias, and John not only disapproved, but he also told Herod his incestuous marriage was unlawful and wrong under Jewish

law. Herodias hated John the Baptist. He was a threat to her status in the imperial court and she wanted him killed. Herod refused and threw him in jail, some think for John's own safety.

"Herod feared John, Mark writes, "knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him" adding he also respected him even though he didn't always understand him, he still visited him in jail.

It's hard to gin up much sympathy for Herod. But some see him as a tragic figure because he knew what he did was wrong and did it anyway.

There's nothing ancient about that story. Likewise sexualized children being exploited by drunken men and ferocious mothers.

We forget that not everyone who encountered the teachings of Jesus or his friend, John the Baptist, were transformed. Greed, evil, and a lust for power can transform a soul as thoroughly as love, mercy, and forgiveness. When repeated enough lies can mutate into beliefs that solidify into "truth."

Remember that noxious phrase, "Alternative facts?" There are not two sides to the evil of slavery, nor are there "good people on both sides" when neo-Nazis are chanting "Jews shall not replace us."

But we know it can happen. We've watched terrorists on January 6th be turned into patriots.

John the Baptist was killed early in Jesus' ministry. Tormented by guilt when Herod realized Jesus was healing the sick and casting out demons, Herod felt John the Baptist must have come back from the grave to torture him.

Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber points out that Herod remained stuck in his own story—unable to grow, move, or change who he was—and what destruction came from it.

Most of us can think of times when we faced choosing truth over denial. Addictions, a dead marriage, the end of an abusive relationship, are some of the obvious ones. Or the more subtle: "Whose vulnerability do I depend on to keep my own comforts intact?"

As painful as it is to admit, there's a bit of Herod in all of us when we surrender to lies in our lives because the truth is just too much to bear, and we lack the courage to change.

There is another way to confront the impossibility of this text which is that the death of John the Baptist was for Jesus a sorrow impossible to bear—an awful, ugly, reality devoid of meaning. This was a new idea for me and revelatory in approaching this text.

Matthew's Gospel adds a few more details about what came afterward. Writes author and theologian Debie Thomas:

When Jesus heard of John's death, "He left in a boat to a remote area to be alone." Can we take this in? He didn't preach. He didn't turn the horror into a morality tale... He withdrew into silence. He sought solitude. He lingered over his pain and created space for it to spend itself.

And then? Then he fed people. The Feeding of the Five Thousand directly follows John's death. Jesus came back from mourning, asked a crowd to sit down, gathered whatever bread and fish he could find, and fed people.¹

What's striking in this for me is that it offers a way to hold the totality of these times which pummel us daily: an attempted political assassination of a former president and presidential candidate at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania yesterday in an already volatile election year. An estimated 90 Gazans dead and 300 wounded who'd fled to a humanitarian zone. The unending war in Ukraine. As Thomas points out, "Some things are too terrible for words. Some hurts can't be salvaged with a neat story."²

Is Jesus actually pointing a way that I have been too blind to see? Does he understand our pain perhaps more than we've realized?

He bore the impossible death of his dear friend alone in silence, grief, and contemplation which may have been all he could do. And then he continued being who he'd been all along. He fed people with whatever he had. There were no shortcuts for him, nor are there for us if we profess to follow him.

The Kingdom of God does not feel as though it's drawing nearer these days. And yet, we crazily persist in doing what we can here on earth because there is no other way. Killing the messenger never kills the message when it's the truth.

So each day we choose the kingdom we serve. The Rev. Canon Marianne Borg exquisitely reminds us of the power we have.

The power that was in John was in Jesus. The power that was in Jesus is in us. In us Jesus is raised from the dead. In us Jesus is risen from the dead. Let us keep him alive. Let us keep him alive in us. Love the world as he did. Do not suffer a failure of nerve. Do not give up. And make Herod tremble.³
AMEN

¹Thomas, Debie, *Journey with Jesus*, A Weekly Webzine for the Global Church, July 15th, 2018

² Ibid.

³Borg, The Rev. Canon Marianne, St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Dubois, Wyoming, July 25th, 2018