

The Rev. Brandon Ashcraft
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 10 (Year B)
Mark 6:14-29
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
July 14, 2024

The Gospel According to HBO

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John: each one a gifted storyteller. And like any good storyteller, they're also good editors. They each make deliberate choices about what to include, and what to leave out, to curate their version of Jesus' story. So on those rare occasions when all four gospels harmonize, it's a clue that the subject of their agreement is of utmost importance. As you might expect, each gospel tells the story of Jesus' passion in great detail. None of them leaves out Peter's confession of faith or his three denials of Jesus. All four gospels tell the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand – the only miracle story that makes the cut in each version. And then, there's John the Baptist.

As one of my favorite preachers writes in a wonderful book about Advent, “All four New Testament Evangelists agree: there is no good news, no *gospel* of Jesus Christ, without John the Baptist [because his life] was lived with but one purpose...to be the witness, to point away from himself to Jesus Christ.”¹ We meet this camel-hair clad, locust-eating prophet at the start of each and every year on the Second Sunday of Advent. Like clockwork, John arrives on the gospel stage to preach repentance and prepare the way for Jesus. But today, on this midsummer morning in Ordinary Time, we hear the gruesome story of John's death. And it's a story that convicts anyone who's ever described the Bible as “boring” of not having actually read it! This biblical narrative has all the ingredients of an HBO series. Part “Game of Thrones,” part “Succession,” it's chock full of violence, seduction, political maneuvering, and family dysfunction.

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018).

We have Herod, the power-hungry wanna-be king. And to be clear, this is not Herod the Great from the Christmas story. It's his son, Herod Antipas. And although Mark calls him "King Herod," he's actually more like a governor. But he wants to be king, and badly. Then we have Herod's wife Herodias, the daughter of Herod's half-brother and the ex-wife of another brother. (Yes, that means Herod's wife is also his half-niece and his former sister-in-law!) John the Baptist has condemned this incestuous and immoral marriage, and Herodias is out for revenge. Which brings us to her daughter, traditionally known as Salome, the pawn in her mother's sordid game. The story climaxes at Herod's debaucherous birthday banquet, where a seductive dance and an ill-conceived promise to a teenager result in John the Baptist's head on a platter. It is a seemingly tragic end for this herald of the Kingdom of God. A grisly final act for the prophet who drew crowds to the waters of new life, to find salvation in Jesus.

I am intrigued that, of all the stories in the Bible, this one has so widely captured artistic imaginations. It's the subject of Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*, which Richard Strauss famously transposed into an opera. One online art vendor I consulted boasts 148 unique artistic renderings of John's beheading.² Our own Boston Museum of Fine Arts counts several etchings and engravings in its collection, as well as two Renaissance paintings, one featuring Herodias holding the platter (that's Francesco del Cairo's version),³ and another presenting Salome holding the decapitated head (that's Bernardino Luini's rendering).⁴ What is it about this violent story that we deem so worthy of preservation? And, more urgently, how does it point us to the good news of the gospel?

² <https://fineartamerica.com/art/paintings/john+the+baptist+beheading>

³ <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/32243/herodias-with-the-head-of-saint-john-the-baptist?jsessionid=FD6E9423ECC625ABB5ACF107EDA3F80B>

⁴ <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/31925>

The early Church was certainly convinced of its importance. As early as the fifth century, the 29th of August was set aside to commemorate John's beheading, making it one of the oldest feasts in the Church Calendar. To our ancestors in the faith, John's death was not the death of a tragic victim but the death of a courageous martyr. The real victim in this story, I dare say, is not John the Baptist, but Herod – strange as that may sound. It's true that Herod bore responsibility for John's death, but if we listen carefully to Mark's account, we will hear notes of Herod's ambivalence about this fateful decision.

Even though Herod found John “perplexing,” he “liked listening” to this “righteous and holy man.”⁵ Indeed, when Salome asks Herod for John's head, her request doesn't bring him the relief you might expect. Instead, it leaves him “deeply grieved.”⁶ *Herod clearly did not want John to die.* There was something about his accuser's truth-telling that Herod found compelling. Something about John's preaching that moved him. And the message John preached over and over, the message that would have captivated Herod, was a message of repentance. An invitation to turn around and go in a new direction. An invitation to start over.

If Herod had made the courageous decision to embrace this gospel message, if he had reoriented his life toward the values of God's kingdom, it would, no doubt, have cost him. His marriage, his public image, not to mention his status and power. It would have forced him to trade prestige for humility. To find true power in weakness. To discover honor, not in kingship, but in servanthood. In the end, Herod's fascination and curiosity was not enough. When the moment of reckoning came, Herod fell victim to his fear. He made the politically expedient choice instead of

⁵ Mark 6:20 (NRSV)

⁶ Mark 6:26 (NRSV)

choosing grace. His decision to choose power over grace results in John's death, but it also deprives Herod of abundant life, leaving him mired in deep grief.

I'm convinced that this story is the source of fascination because it reveals something about us. Something timeless and true about human nature. As a society, we'd like to think we're more enlightened than our biblical ancestors. After all, our present age is the product of unprecedented scientific discovery, human progress, and intellectual advancement. And yet, variations of this ancient story play out in our world every day. We don't have to look far to see the consequences of ruthless fear-driven quests for power. Nor are we strangers to acts of political violence, as the last 24 hours have shown us.⁷

As followers of the Prince of Peace, it is our calling to condemn violence in all its forms. As heralds of the gospel, it is our duty to rise above the fray of unbridled partisanship that mars this earthly kingdom. It is our vocation to manifest the unity that defines the body of Christ. Resisting the trend toward factionalism is no easy task. The 24/7 news cycle and our social media feeds sow constant discord and discontent, confronting us, unabated, with competing versions of the truth. Which is why we come here. To seek a higher truth. To encounter Jesus, Truth incarnate, in the food and drink of the altar, and in the words of holy scripture.

On this day, we find inspiration in the courageous witness of the John the Baptist. The forerunner of the Lord, both in his life and his death. The one "who lived with but one purpose... to be the witness, to point away from himself to Jesus Christ." May we have the resolve to make John's vocation our vocation. May God give us the courage to live with John's singleness of purpose, so that our lives and our witness always point others to Jesus Christ.

⁷ This sermon was preached the day following an attempted assassination of former President Trump at a campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania that left one rally attendee dead, two critically injured. The shooter was also killed by a Secret Service sniper.

Let us pray.

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart and especially the hearts of the people of this land, that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.