

A Terrible Tale

Mark 6:14-29

Savannah is a haunted town. At least that's what the tour operators would have you believe. Everywhere we went during our mission trip we saw modified hearses toting around tourists eager to hear a chilling tale, or catch a glimpse of a wandering, restless spirit. And each time one of those hearses passed us I would overhear snippets of conversation among the kids speculating about the existence of ghosts.

I hear a ghost every week when I sit down to write a sermon; the ghost of my homiletics professor, Elizabeth Achtemeier. "Give them the good news," she says to me every week, just as she said to all of us in class years ago. "Make sure that when you preach, you give them the good news. A lot of these people have had a rough week. They come to church to be told there is something more, better. They come hungry for good news."

That was hard to do this week – there is not much good news in this text: In fact, this is one of those stories in scripture that some have dubbed a terrible text. It is full of violence, corruption, scandal, depravity and truly appalling behavior on everyone's part. There are no good people in this story.

But there is a ghost in this story. At least, Herod thinks that Jesus is a ghost, the ghost of John, back to finish his work, or maybe just to haunt him. Ghosts are what we get when people have either inspired us, or troubled us. When we feel guilty, and Herod was, indeed, feeling guilty. Mark tells us why in a flashback. According to him, the trouble started 'on account of Herodias,' although it seems to me that the trouble really started with Herod. Herodias was Herod's sister-in-law. Phillip's wife. Or she was, at least, until she became Herod's wife. And knowing the violent and scheming ways of the Herod family, that transition didn't occur in a morally above-board, mutually agreed on fashion. Herod has not acted like a ruler; a leader. He has not demonstrated integrity or a high ethical standard. And worse, he has not behaved as a man of God. And John tells him so, knowing John, rather plainly. And we all know what happened. Herod has him arrested and jailed, and one night at a party he stupidly promises his wife's dancing daughter anything she wants. Prompted by Mummy, she asks for the head of John the Baptist, served up on the family silver.

So how does a story like this end up in the gospel? There's nothing of Jesus in it. There's nothing that appears even remotely redeeming in it. The wrong isn't righted. John isn't raised. Herod isn't punished. It is one of the very few terrible texts that appears in the lectionary. Even the Old Testament lesson cut out the terrible part where Uzzah reaches out to try to keep the ark from falling and gets smote for his efforts to do the right thing. So why is this story here? Why did Mark feel the need to write it? Why did lectionary include it? Is it possible that there **is** any good news in it for us?

Getting to the answer may be like holding a ball of yarn and trying to get to the other end of it: you have to unwind the whole ball to do it. But here is the starting point, in v 14: "King Herod heard of it". It? What was the 'it'?

This is another one of those sandwich stories, like the one we had two weeks ago. This terrible story is imbedded in the story of Jesus sending the disciples out, two by two, to teach and cast out unclean spirits and to ‘proclaim that all should repent.’ Just before this Jesus sends them out. Right after this they come back and report in.

And in the middle we hear about what happens to people who go out and proclaim that all should repent. That’s exactly what John did, and it didn’t go so well for him, did it? Preaching repentance doesn’t always bring a favorable result. Plus there’s no small amount of foreshadowing in this story – Jesus reminds Herod of John. John is put to death by the authorities; Jesus will be put to death by the authorities. The disciples, who will proclaim the same message, just might have the same response to their preaching and teaching as well.

Still not good news, is it? So maybe we need to keep unwinding that ball of yarn. Maybe we need to go back even further, to the story of the calming of the storm. Do you remember the question the disciples were left asking themselves? Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him? Who is this man? It is really the question that is carried through the whole gospel of Mark – who is this man?

I think it is that question that takes us to the good news of this text. Who is this man? Who is Jesus? Herod thought he was John. Others thought he was Elijah. The lonely think of him as a man of compassion and gentleness. The sick and those who are sick of suffering around them look to him to be a healer, a man who could do amazing things. In fact, Robert Capon, in his book, *Hunting the Divine Fox*, talks about how we have come to view Jesus as a sort of superhero – SuperJesus: a “visitor from another planet, who came to earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men, and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American Way....he is gentle, meek and mild, but with secret, souped-up, more-than-human insides”.

Who is Jesus: In Mark’s gospel we never know fully until the cross, but along the way we get glimpses and hints, and all of them, everything he says, everything he does points to something far greater than just a prophet, or a kind and compassionate savior, or a healer, a worker of miracles. Everything – from his teaching to calming the storm – tells us that he is a person of great power, great authority; not just to do wonders that defy the laws of nature; not just someone who can change your life, and make life easier, better, but someone who can change you.

That’s the real crux of the matter, isn’t it? That’s what’s been at the heart of God’s entire relationship with his people almost since the very beginning. To change us. To restore us. The self-improvement people would have us believe that with effort and discipline we can become the person we’ve always wanted to be; more likeable, more self-confident, more in control of our lives, and, of course, thinner. But you and I know better, or at least we should. This isn’t self-improvement, it’s sanctification. It isn’t a matter of turning ourselves into the beautiful, successful and charming people we’ve always wanted to be. It’s God, turning us into the people we were created to be. People who love, and people who trust. Two, simple, basic things.

But the two simple, basic things that we fight tooth and nail. Frankly, changing us, turning us into Christ-like people is more of a miracle than bringing someone back from the dead or feeding 5,000 with a Happy Meal. Ask anyone who has ever struggled with humility, or anger, or anxiety, or control issues, or addictions, or self-discipline, or ego, or the desire for success and prominence. They'll be glad to tell you that it would be easier to earn a PhD or build a skyscraper than to change. It's probably even easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle. We like the idea of humility. Sometimes. We dream of setting our cares and worries aside and trusting that God will take care of us. For about five minutes, until we suspect God has gone on break. We'd like to love money less and our neighbor more. As long as Jesus never asks us to sell all we have and give the money to the poor.

And this is where we find ourselves at the very center of that ball of yarn. That is what brings us to the good news, buried deep in this terrible story.

We can't change ourselves. But God can. If we are willing to face who and what we are. John didn't go to Herod to condemn him. He went to offer him the chance to change. To be changed. He went to hold a mirror up to Herod and show him his life and how far astray he had gone. He confronted Herod, yes. He condemned his actions, yes. But not Herod himself. He went to give him the opportunity to repent.

That is the good news. The voice of the prophet isn't condemning us. It is offering us hope. It is offering us a miracle. We want the gentle, nurturing, life-improving Jesus. The Jesus who always has kind and gracious things to say to us. The Jesus who makes us feel safe and warm and good about ourselves. But Jesus didn't come to make us feel warm and safe and good about ourselves. Jesus came to save us from our self- and world destructive ways. Jesus came so that we can be something different, so that we can be like him. And sometimes that means we have to be shaken up a bit. Sometimes we have to have someone point out the rough edges, and the flaws and the indecencies in us. Sometimes the truth about us must be told, and told in a voice that we cannot ignore. Because unless we hear it, unless we see it, that unpleasant truth, unless it makes us penitent instead of murderous, God cannot change us.

That is the good news. I hope you avail yourselves of it. What do I mean? I mean that I hope that you have a prophet in your life. Everyone needs a prophet. Unfortunately, I suppose, we tend to hang around people who make us feel good about ourselves. People who are encouraging and supportive and kind enough to ignore our flaws. And in the church especially we pride ourselves on being nurturing and forgiving of each others faults and sins. After all, Jesus did, right? Well, yes and no. He forgave them, he didn't ignore them. He loved the people too much to ignore them.

And so I hope you have a prophet in your life. Someone who loves you enough to bring the truth about you to light. Someone who can hear your confessions about your failures and your sins and your struggles, and not just tell you, 'that's all right, we all have our faults,' but pray for you and hold you accountable as God slowly works his miracle in you. I hope you have those people in your Sunday School class, or your Bible study. If we don't love each other enough around here to be able to admit how terribly flawed we are and be prodded and prayed for, then we aren't really being the Church, are we?

John went to Herod with good news. Granted, it didn't sound much like good news, buried deep in his words of dark truth, but it was there. But Herod couldn't hear it. He wouldn't hear it. And that's what really makes this a terrible text. The good news, the opportunity to experience the grace of God and be transformed into something better, someone more like God and less like, well, us, was rejected. Violently.

The good news isn't always wrapped up in pretty packages. Sometimes it comes to us more like a fist to the stomach, but it is good news nonetheless. Accept it. Welcome it. And please, don't kill the prophet.