

“Must the Bible Be So Graphic?”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Mark 6:14-29
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
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In case you were wondering, there is no shortage of historical paintings depicting the decapitated John the Baptist. I discovered this while searching for artwork for the front of your worship guide, and I was amazed, or alarmed, at how many images of this particular biblical scene are available. Every week I have to search the interwebs high and low to find a single non-white portrayal of Jesus, but finding a headless John? No problem.

However, I couldn't seem to find a single image of his head on a platter that would inspire us to worship God, so I selected instead this image of Herodias and her daughter because I found their faces so striking . . . but the truth is that I had to crop it for the worship guide because in the bottom of the painting is—you guessed—the head of John the Baptist quite unattached to his body, and in this particularly jarring rendition, the daughter's hand rests on the hilt of a sword or knife as if she herself did the beheading. You might think she might as well have done it herself since the beheading was at her request, but as is so often the case, there is much more to the story than a simple murder.

But before we dissect the gloomy details, why tell this story at all? It so very gruesome, so bloody there wasn't a single painting of the scene that felt appropriate for the context of worship . . . and so why retell the story at all as a part of worship? Why have artists through the centuries been fascinated enough to paint it? And perhaps, more importantly, why is it in our Bible? Why did the writer of the Gospel feel compelled to include this horrendous tale?

Interestingly the biblical account begins not with the facts of the case but with Herod's misunderstanding. The story begins with the ending, because after John is beheaded, Herod hears about Jesus and Jesus' acts of power, and Herod thinks Jesus must be John raised from the dead. Perhaps as cousins they looked alike, but more than that, they preached alike. They both proclaimed with power and authority and with seemingly no fear of the consequences. John had preached against Herod's marriage to his brother's wife, which was a dangerous sort of thing on which to offer a public opinion. Jesus likewise had no trouble telling the truth to power. When Herod heard about Jesus, he thought it *must be* John all over again, even though he knew good and well John was dead since Herod himself had seen to it.

And so perhaps the fact that Herod thinks there has been a resurrection foreshadows for us the actual resurrection, which will happen later, and perhaps that is why Mark chose to include this story about John the Baptist and Herod. However, if that's the case, it seems a bit of a crass way to foreshadow resurrection given the fact that John, in fact, remains quite dead. And so perhaps this is not a way to foreshadow Christ's resurrection; rather, it foreshadows his death. If Herod will kill John at the mere request of a young girl, Jesus is anything but safe.

But did Mark really need to go into all that gruesome detail just to give us a heads up that things might go sour for Jesus? Couldn't he have spared us a bit of the blood and guts? I would like to suggest that Mark would be doing us a disservice had he failed to record the truth. There is a reason we tell difficult stories about things like murders and Holocausts and lynchings and bombings, and it isn't just to be graphic for graphic's sake. For one thing, victims in these stories deserve to be remembered, deserve to have their stories told. They deserve for us to take time with their stories, for us to face the violence in humanity that we might learn to confront the violence within ourselves.

The nature of the Gospel is to reveal rather than conceal human wickedness and dysfunction. The nature of the Gospel is radical truth-telling, and as we see in John's story, radical truth-telling doesn't win you any prizes. John told the truth about Herod's shady marriage to his brother's wife and it cost him dearly. We see in both Jesus and John that the Gospel clashes with political power. If you are a follower of Jesus you can expect conflict with those in power.

We see in Herod a metaphor of the rich and powerful who are more committed to maintaining their reputations than maintaining integrity. He's more interested in saving face than in saving life.

What kind of idiot offers up to half his kingdom to a dancing girl? A drunk idiot, of course. Drunk and lustful. We mustn't think of this dance as an innocent ballet recital. This was the kind of dance that made men stupid. This was the kind of dance no daughter should ever be asked to perform for her stepfather and his friends.

I've wondered what Herod would have done if she had asked for half his kingdom. Since that would have impacted him and diminished *his* power, I'm gonna guess he would have found a way out of keeping his promise, had she asked him to share his dominion. But instead she asked for something that was easier for a powerful man to stomach—the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

It's not that Herod wanted him dead—the storyteller makes it clear that up until that point, it was Herod who was keeping John alive. Mark sounds almost sympathetic to Herod, as if Herod were doing John a favor by keeping him in prison and away from his murderous wife. But when caught off guard with a request to deliver John's head on a platter in the middle of a party in front of his guests, I suspect Herod was afraid that saying “no” would make him look weak. Who but a coward would protect the guy who has been criticizing your marriage? Herodias, I believe, was banking on Herod's ego. What he refused her in private he could not afford to refuse her in public, and she used her own daughter as a pawn in her plot to bring down John and win her disagreement with Herod.

And so when we commemorate the great tragedy of John the Baptist, let us not forget the plight of Herodias' daughter who was exploited not once, but twice. First as a sexual object for the enjoyment of her father and his drunken guests and second as her mother's lackey in the quest for violent revenge. She does not have a role in this story except to be used, first by her father and then by her mother, the two people she should have been able to trust the most in this world.

How many times in her life did she relieve the trauma of carrying a man's bloody head on a platter, agonizing over whether it was her fault for dancing (as she was told), her fault for asking for the head (as she was told)? How many years passed before the nightmares stopped? Did they ever stop? Did either of her parents ever apologize for what they had put her through? As in most cases of abuse, probably not. No real apology anyway. Perhaps they even used the story as ammunition against her. "Who are you to argue your righteous opinion? You once asked for the head of John on a platter!" I can imagine Herod bitter at her, for it was easier to accuse the child for John's death than to admit to his own recklessness, exploitation, and fear of losing power. I can imagine Herodias needing someone else to blame for the whole affair so her husband wouldn't hate her for John's death, and who made a better scapegoat than her child from another man?

John's death is surely to be grieved, but so is this girl's life, forever altered by the greed and jealousy and violence of the adults in her life.

Perhaps the Bible must tell us these graphic stories because life is graphic. There is no sense in a religion that whitewashes abuse and thus aids and abets abusers by maintaining the secrecy abuse requires in order to thrive. This gory reality has been preserved because it happened and there is no value to covering up corruption or pretending it doesn't happen.

As we say in the Christian tradition, there is no resurrection without Good Friday. There is no rising without dying. Or in other words, the truth will set you free, even when, maybe especially when, the truth is painful.

If you have ever suffered abuse of any kind, I want you to know, my friend, God sees you. God has taken note, and God will not write you out of the story because your story is one of a pain. Other Christians may ignore or bypass your suffering, but God does not. You are not forgotten. You are remembered, and you are known. If you are threatened or hurting, God is paying especially close attention to you. You are seen.

I can't explain to you why horrendous things happen to people any more than I can explain to you why Herod and Herodias thought violence would solve their problems. What I do know is that God doesn't leave anyone to suffer or die alone. The death of John the Baptist and even the abuse of Herodias' daughter foreshadow the suffering of Christ himself. Before long Mark will continue his story and tell of the loving act of a God who came down to earth in the form of Jesus to suffer with us and for us. This doesn't mean we should seek martyrdom or seek suffering. It doesn't mean God wants us to feel pain or that we should accept abuse as our lot in life. It means that when tough stuff happens to us, it also happens to God, who bears our grief and carries our sorrows.

Concerning John the Baptist and Herodias' daughter, we acknowledge that tragically, evil won that day, and without a doubt, God was grieving. At the same time, we see that rather than feeling victorious, Herod ends up rattled and disconcerted, already afraid that even death cannot stop the Gospel-bearers of this world. And though John remained dead, Herod's fears were not misguided. The Gospel indeed lived on in the person of Jesus, and lives on in us, Christ's church. Because of Jesus, John's death was not in vain. Because of the power of Christ and the

faithfulness of the church, death does not have the final word. Tragedy and abuse do not have the final word. Suffering does not have the final word. We are not defined by whatever bad things have happened to us. We are defined by new life, resurrected life, God's life in us. This world we live in can be truly brutal and gruesome. There is no point denying it. That which is covered up cannot experience healing. But by acknowledging what is broken and painful, we make way for newness and hope.

I, for one, am grateful that our sacred text doesn't skirt around pain, because if it did, what value would these words be to those of us who have known pain? Can anything meaningful come from dishonesty? Can a future be built on a forgotten and unacknowledged past?

Friends, whatever is broken and hurting in your life, may you not feel shame in the telling of it. May the boldness of the Bible to name what is true infect your own life so that vulnerability is no longer a thing to fear but a pathway to resurrection and grace. You are known. You are seen. You are loved. It is okay to tell your truth whenever you are ready to do so. Amen.