

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Bethany Ulrich

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I could not help but wince when I found out I'd be preaching on this passage this week. It's hard to *read*, much less preach on. First, it doesn't sit right with me that John the Baptist was imprisoned simply for pointing out a hard truth. It doesn't sit right with me that Herod would rather kill an innocent person than be embarrassed in front of his guests. It doesn't sit right with me that somehow his child gets caught in the middle of the grudge that he and his wife have with John the Baptist. It DOES NOT sit right with me that Herod- father, leader, host- ABUSES his power in so many ways.

At every turn of this passage, I want to intervene- mediate a conversation or compromise between John and the Herodian love triangle. I find myself wanting to stir up a commotion at the banquet- so that the guests themselves would keep Herod from senseless violence. I find myself wanting to call a social worker or a therapist for his daughter who surely was left traumatized after this gory scene.

John the Baptist's death, especially in all the details given here by Mark- is violent, unnecessary, and AWFUL on so many levels. It is all very unsettling and honestly it is hard to see any bright side, any hope, any good news here.

Unfortunately, as much as I want to turn my eyes from this text- put it out of sight out of mind and not think about it too much- the reality is- so often our lives are

like this. So often there are seemingly no happy endings, no happily-ever-afters... seemingly no good news anywhere to be found.

This week the US started to pull out soldiers from a 20-year war in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, at the *same* time we hear reports that the Taliban is taking over new territories each day. And *at the same time* reports share that some local people are worried about their fates- reports say some are trying to flee and stocking up on weapons and protective gear because they fear for their lives.¹ After the 20 year US intervention in Afghanistan, after 2000 US lives taken and over 70,000 Afghani lives taken- how could THIS be how we are leaving the country?^{2,3} On a podcast this week I heard a journalist and former Marine who fought in the Afghanistan war, say that THIS is the question that keeps him up at night.⁴ It doesn't sit right with him. And like Herod's banquet and John the Baptist's beheading- The whole thing just doesn't sit right with me either... I don't want to think about it too much. Because the reality is too uncomfortable to comprehend- and I don't see the bright side- or the good news anywhere.

So too, in so many areas of lives, so often we don't get the ending we want. Marriages that end in bitter divorce... Jobs that we get let go from... Painful betrayal in our family and at work... Family feuds go on for generations and are impossible

¹ "The End of America's 20 Year War" NYT The Daily Podcast, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/08/podcasts/the-daily/afghanistan-withdrawal-us-military-bases.html?action=click&module=audio-series-bar®ion=header&pgtype=Article>

² "Afghan Civilian Casualties" <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2010/aug/10/afghanistan-civilian-casualties-statistics>

³ "Costs of War," <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/military/killed>

⁴ "The End of America's 20 Year War" NYT The Daily Podcast, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/08/podcasts/the-daily/afghanistan-withdrawal-us-military-bases.html?action=click&module=audio-series-bar®ion=header&pgtype=Article>

to reconcile... Lost loved ones- sometimes from unexpected deaths. But sometimes - from a long, slow, distancing, over time, without much explanation.... These aren't the endings anyone dreams of or hopes for.

When we have so much messiness in the *real* world and in our *real* lives, **why** has *this gruesome story been captured and preserved in Scripture, in the gospels of Mark AND Matthew?* Maybe it is so we sit with the realities of this world, maybe so that we do see something of our own drama and tragedy in the Scripture, in the word of God. MAYBE it is a foreshadowing of what Jesus, and his disciples would encounter, and even the persecution that the early church would encounter.

Maybe it has endured because.... over all these years.... it has taught us something about what Jesus is NOT, what God's vision for the world is NOT. You see, last week we read that Jesus sent out his disciples to heal and anoint with oil, to cast out demons, and to preach. As they were preaching, people started wondering- Who is this Jesus guy? They started comparing him to other Messianic figures that they knew of.

Perhaps this story of Herod and this banquet going terribly wrong, ALSO gives us a glimpse into the answer of "Who is Jesus?" By showing us the type of ruler that Jesus is NOT.

Just after this passage about Herod's banquet, in our gospel text for next week- SPOILER ALERT- we will hear about Jesus and **another kind** of banquet. After the disciples return from their missionary journeys, they have a sizeable crowd

following them and when they got hungry- Jesus had compassion on them, had them sit down in groups, and using what the disciples had on them, he fed the five thousand people present (probably more counting women and children) with just five loaves and two fish.

Mark sets up this huge contrast between these two banquets. Herod's banquet surely had all the richest and most important people present and ended with abuse of power and DEATH. Jesus' banquet had people from all over the countryside- anyone who wanted to come- and THIS banquet- **Jesus' banquet**- ended with equality, abundance, satisfaction and with LIFE.

The violent ending of John the Baptist leaves us *yearning* for another way, *another* ending, *another* possibility for life, like Jesus' banquet. John the Baptist was *one* prophet that preached of this OTHER WAY. And there are many others... The prophet Amos also shares a vision of ANOTHER way. Today we read about the time that he describes a vision he had where God shows him a plumbline in the middle of the city. A string with a weight on it that guides builders to make sure they build straight walls- not slanted ones that could fall over. That plumbline of God is that OTHER way of life and of relating to one another that we are called to let guide our lives. Where betrayals and long-held divisions are smoothed over, where priorities are rearranged, SELFLESSNESS guides us rather than selfish-ness. Compassion rules over revenge or grudges, where ALL benefit and not just a select few, where life is GIVEN and not taken.

And these prophetic voices that announce this OTHER way continue to call out to **us today**. The very inclusion of this story in scripture urges us to sit with the messiness. To not turn our heads from the pain of our Christian history, the pain that our own country has caused in other parts of the world, nor the pain of our own lives.

Mark includes this story even though it will not be easy to hear because sometimes there ARE NOT easy explanations for sometimes truly inexplicable suffering and injustice.

But **this story** in the context of **Jesus' story**- the whole life of Jesus- and even in the context of the entire Scriptures- this horrific story ALSO calls us to contemplate the possibility of **another ending**... it makes us wonder, did it HAVE to be this way? It makes us contemplate an alternative way of being, of political leadership, of relationships, and every other hopeless situation.

Because when you've reached the bottom. When you've had that sinking feeling in your stomach that you can't save the relationship, or that tragedy has indeed struck, or that life just is NOT what you thought it was going to be. When you've gotten to that place...the possibility - just the mere POSSIBILITY- of another ending is the best news possible.⁵

⁵ David Lose, "Tell the Truth Twice," <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/tell-the-truth-twice>

There is another ending, another type of banquet waiting for us- not the nightmarish one of today's text- but one of satisfaction and abundance- a way that is better and way beyond what we could even imagine for ourselves.

I like the way Pastor David Lose says it. He says, "Jesus came to make possible for us **more** than mere survival, **more** than mere persistence, **more** even than mere success. Jesus came to help us to imagine that there is more to this life than we can perceive. Jesus came to offer us not just more life, but abundant life. Jesus came so that there could be a better ending to our stories and the story of the world than we can imagine or construct on our own." ⁶

So yes, dear friends. This is one horrible story. And the truth of the banquets gone wrong in our world and lives are more present than ever. But I hope and pray that today you would also hold onto another truth that Jesus has written us into another story, a different story, a different ENDING, better than we can dream or imagine.

May we lean into the future with our eyes and minds set on *that* story, on *that* truth, and *that* banquet of heaven waiting for us.

Amen.

⁶ David Lose, "Tell the Truth Twice," <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/tell-the-truth-twice>