

Proper 10 B  
Mark 6:14-29  
July 11, 2021

*“To be continued...”*  
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<sup>14</sup>King Herod heard of [the ministry of Jesus and the disciples], for Jesus’ name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” <sup>15</sup>But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” <sup>16</sup>But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

<sup>17</sup>For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. <sup>18</sup>For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” <sup>19</sup>And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, <sup>20</sup>for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. <sup>21</sup>But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. <sup>22</sup>When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” <sup>23</sup>And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.” <sup>24</sup>She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.” <sup>25</sup>Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” <sup>26</sup>The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. <sup>27</sup>Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and

beheaded him in the prison, <sup>28</sup>brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.<sup>29</sup>When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

*May the words of my mouth  
and the meditations of all our hearts together,  
be acceptable in your sight, O God,  
our rock, our redeemer, and our friend.*

When I was in high school, my family hosted a French student teacher who was spending a year in my little Iowa town to perfect her English before returning to France to teach English full time. Her name was Virginee. With the exception of my brother, we all got along well with Virginee and she invited my sister and I to join her and her family in France for a few weeks the following summer. We did.

While we were there, we visited a magnificent cathedral basilica in the town of Amien. European cathedrals often have collections of relics – bones of saints, wood or nails from the cross, things usually brought back from Constantinople or the Holy Land during the crusades. Amien’s claim to fame was its possession of the severed head of St. John the Baptist. Usually, however, these relics are not on display, but, as is the custom, once per year the head is paraded around and then placed in a glass reliquary for viewing. As luck would have it, we visited the cathedral on that very day. I have to say, it was kind of exhilarating to stare into the mummified face of the saint. Admittedly, the jewels that had been pressed into the skull were a bit of a distraction, but I could tell my friends and family that I’d actually seen a character from the Bible!

Little did I know, however, that the head of St. John the Baptist was also on display at San Silvestro in Rome, in Munich Germany, and at Umayyad Mosque in Syria. Who knew a person could have so many heads!

Whatever eventually became of John the Baptist’s head, this is relatively certain—it was no longer attached to the rest of his body. Herod had seen

to that! The Herod in this story is none other than Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great.

Herod has just married Herodias, the former wife of his younger brother (also named Herod), because this marriage gave him a stronger claim to his father's throne.

But the form of Herodias' divorce from her former husband and her marriage to Herod Antipas was criticized by many, including John the Baptist. This was embarrassing and politically dangerous to both Herod and Herodias, and so Herod had John arrested and locked him up. But then a funny thing happened. Herod couldn't bring himself to eliminate this threat to his power. He was afraid of John, Mark's gospel reports, because he knew John was righteous and holy and, as it turned out, he liked his preaching.

Herodias, however, shared neither her new husband's fear of, nor affinity for, John. An opportunity for Herodias to act arose when Herod threw a banquet for some of his courtiers and local leaders, and her daughter (also named Herodias) danced for and entranced her stepfather. Herod, caught up in a moment of exuberance, promised to give her anything, up to half his kingdom. When Herodias' daughter asked her counsel, she prompted her daughter to ask for John's head on a platter and Herod, afraid to renege on a promise made before all these VIPs, consented.<sup>1</sup>

The whole story isn't so different from a soap opera or an episode of Game of Thrones or Bridgerton, but it ends with John's head on a platter and the rest of John's body in a tomb.

If I'm completely honest, this text is the stuff of nightmares for a preacher—at least this preacher. What's the moral of the story? Where's the take-away? Where's the gospel—the good news—that we are called

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, adapted from <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1621>

to proclaim? After all, isn't that the primary calling of a preacher? And have we not been trained to squeeze a passage, as Martin Luther once said, until it yields good news? Absolutely! So, what's the good news of this text? I've come to the conclusion that, quite simply, there isn't any... Except for the fact that it's not the end of the story. That's it. The story goes on.

I wonder, might that actually be good news for some of us today? Illness, grief, divorce, financial uncertainty, political strife in our country and in our world...these are not the end of the story. The story goes on.

In the verses immediately following the macabre account of John's death in Mark's gospel, Jesus shows up again. Teachings about love and mercy show up again, miracles—the feeding of the 5,000 and walking on water—miracles show up again. New life shows up again. Hope and mystery and possibility and good news all show up again. There is nothing redemptive about this morbid story except for the simple fact that it's not the end. And the truth is, no matter what we are going through right now in our lives or in the life of our nation or in the life of our world, the story isn't over.

So, I guess today I just really want to encourage you to keep reading the story, keep living the story. Take heart—whatever macabre passage you're reading, whatever dark valley you're walking through, whatever shadowy purgatory you find yourself passing through—take heart because the story isn't over. Hope and mystery and possibility and good news—they show up again. It gets better. Thanks be to God. Amen.