

The Herod Family, Bad Leadership, and Prophetic Rewards  
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Mark 6:14-29

"He went and beheaded him in prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl." (Mark 6:27-28a, NRSV)

Oof.

This is one of those stories in the Bible which leaves a sour taste in my mouth. There just doesn't seem to be any good news in it. In the end, John the Baptizer is dead because he, like so many other prophets before and since, spoke the truth to someone powerful, and they did not like what he had to say. If we dig a little deeper, we will also find a classic case of triangulation, where one person manipulates someone else for the express purpose of pushing a third to give them what they want, as well as the exploitation of a minor to suit those ends. That Mark tells it at all, and then sandwiches it in the middle of the disciples' first teaching mission, suggests that it has two purposes. One is to provide a reminder that while Jesus' work is important, there are other things happening in the background which affect it. The second, and perhaps more important purpose, is to mark the passing of the torch from John to Jesus, including the ominous last verse foreshadowing Jesus' own death and burial.

This tale of palace intrigue begins with an introduction to the dysfunctional Herod family, which was part of the governance structure in Judea in the early days of Roman occupation. The members of that family present here are as follows:

- Herod Antipas, otherwise known as "the king." His official title was actually Tetrarch, as he was one of four governors overseeing the province of Judea

in the early part of its Roman occupation. He was in power roughly from 4 BCE – 39 CE, so he might be the Herod Matthew describes as being paranoid that the newborn Jesus could usurp him as "king of the Jews." Or Matthew's Herod might be Antipas' father, Herod the Great. Regardless, it's a popular name, like Edward or George among the British monarchs, so keeping them all straight can be a bit of a challenge.

- Next, there's another Herod, sometimes called Philip, who's the brother of Antipas and the one-time husband of Herodias. He's also the father of the young girl who dances for the king and his dinner guests. Philip himself doesn't figure prominently in this episode, except that his failed marriage is the beginning of John the Baptizer's public criticism of the whole family.
- Third, there is Herodias, the mother of the girl, the current wife of Antipas, and the ex-wife of Philip. She may also have been a cousin of theirs. Her spouse-swapping would definitely have raised a few eyebrows nowadays. What makes it just that much worse is that she and Herod have blatantly disregarded the prohibition against a man marrying his brother's ex-wife in Leviticus 18:16. That's the reason John called them out... and that public critique is why Herodias wants John dead.
- And, lastly, we have the daughter of Herodias, sometimes known as Salome. Mark seems to reflect some confusion from his sources about her – that is, is she Herod Antipas' daughter, his niece, or someone else? Some interpreters have historically tried to make more of her performance than the gospel writers and other primary sources who describe the Herod family do. She's

not trying to seduce Herod or his dinner guests – that's gross, even by ancient standards – but rather she's being used by her mother to get what her mother wants, which is John's head served up on a platter.

All of this adds up to "a depiction of noxious people who hold power."<sup>1</sup> And these noxious people, by their actions, do not establish themselves at all as good leaders. They openly flout the Law and make choices which are ethically questionable at best. To be fair, Herod is kind of stuck between a rock and a hard place, here. He can either do what's actually the right thing – that is, he can choose to show mercy to John and not honor Salome's, and Herodias', wishes. Or, he can risk losing face in front of his dinner guests by breaking the promise he made to Salome that she could have whatever she wanted. Doing that would have greatly reduced his social standing with his guests. Just as difficult for Herod to swallow is the idea that "...defaulting on an oath could be reckoned as tantamount to taking God's name in vain."<sup>2</sup> Herod chooses to save his own skin, despite feeling deeply grieved, and poor John ends up paying the price for Herod's vanity.

As a commentary on Herod's leadership, this is devastating. But, this sort of thing is not a new story at all. It's also decidedly not what God expects of those who would take on leadership of God's people. Kings in ancient Israel were expected to do three things: one, keep the worship of God centralized in Jerusalem, and lead the way in having no other gods but God; two, to stand up on behalf of the people; and three, to be

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Skinner, "Commentary on Mark 6:14-29." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-15-2/commentary-on-mark-614-29-6> [accessed July 8, 2024].

<sup>2</sup> C. Clifton Black, "Commentary on Mark 6:14-29." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-15-2/commentary-on-mark-614-29-3> [accessed July 8, 2024].

the human extension of God's rule over Israel.<sup>3</sup> Herod does none of those things here. He has no consideration at all for anyone other than himself. There's not any indication that he knows that his wife is manipulating everyone involved here from behind the scenes. And if you know the history of kings in ancient Israel, as Mark's readers likely did, the only conclusion to be drawn from this is that Herod fits the pattern of his predecessors who did what was evil in the sight of God, and that consequences of some sort would be coming Herod's, and the people's, way before too long.

Lurking just beyond the Herod family's soap opera, and wagging his finger at it, is John the Baptizer. Like every prophetic type before and after him, John has a specific call from God to be brutally honest about what's going on around him. That's particularly the case when it does not conform to what God's intentions for God's people are – for example, Herod marrying his brother's ex-wife. Prophets like John also have an unfortunate track record of being publicly humiliated or even killed when they speak truths that authority figures don't like. Their stories remind us that it's costly to do business on God's behalf. That's especially so when it requires us to stick our necks out on someone else's account, and without the expectation of being rewarded for it in some way.

John's story reminds us that "rewards" aren't part of the divine economy. In the book *Bread of Angels*, Barbara Brown Taylor points out that, "... the only reward for doing God's work is doing God's work. Period. Furthermore, if we do it really well, we are likely to get ourselves killed. Or at least sent to the doghouse, whether that is a shed in the yard with a tin-can telephone or a night in the stocks after a run-in with the chief of

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<sup>3</sup> Cian Power, "Kingship in Ancient Israel." [https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/TBv3i3\\_PowerKingship.pdf](https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/TBv3i3_PowerKingship.pdf) [accessed July 10, 2024].

police. That is what success looks like in the upside-down kingdom of God, and so far as I know, no one has ever liked it."<sup>4</sup>

John's reward for doing God's work was to be killed in prison and his head presented to Herodias on a platter. He never asked what was in it for him, though he probably knew that there was a strong possibility his loud mouth and his message that people needed to repent and be baptized would lead to this. But, when did God ever tell him – tell us – that he would get respect, influence, or even protection for doing God's work?<sup>5</sup> Unlike Herod, John saw beyond his own self-importance to glimpse a God who would go to no end to save the world God had made. He couldn't quite describe what that looked like, beyond the proclamation that "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals" (Mark 1:7). In that, he recognized there is no reward. "There is only the self-annihilating love of God, who raises us from the dead."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "No Rewards." In *Bread of Angels* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Brothers, 1997), 23-29.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.