

Sermon Preached by the Rev. John S. Nieman  
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church  
July 11, 2018 Pentecost 7/Proper 10/Year B  
Texts – 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

I begin with a confession. In over thirty-five years of preaching, I think I've managed to avoid that story we just heard from Mark's gospel. I don't know how I did it, but I can't recall ever taking it up in a sermon. So here goes.

I start by wondering why Mark chooses to tell this gruesome, somewhat creepy story. It's a reasonable question, because the story of the beheading of John the Baptist seems to be dropped arbitrarily into the flow of the narrative. You'll remember last week we got the first part of this 6<sup>th</sup> chapter in Mark's gospel. There Jesus comes to his hometown to teach in the synagogue, and he's rejected by those who have known him his whole life. "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown," Jesus says there. Then he sends out the twelve as emissaries of the Good News. So they went out, the passage says, and "They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them."

Now, if we were to take today's story out of the picture, the narrative would quite naturally pick up with verse 30, which says "The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught." In other words, they tell Jesus about their adventures on the road, the road on which Jesus had just sent them. Jesus listens, and invites them to come away by themselves for a rest, a lead-in to the story of the feeding of the 5000.

So why does Mark decide to drop today's story, what feels like an interruption, right in the middle of what seems like a natural narrative flow? There is a message here, and it's not pretty.

The story, as I said, is gruesome and a little creepy. It reads like a chapter out of a Stephen King novel, or snippet from a news report describing the brutality of Kim Jong-un. It's a fairly well-known story, in large part because it comes to us through several layers of cultural accretions. For example, we have come to call the young girl in the story "Salome." That despite the fact that she is not named Salome anywhere in the story. Matthew, who re-tells this story in a slightly abbreviated form, also does not call her Salome. It turns out the first century historian, Josephus, identifies her with that name. And that's what stuck. Oscar Wilde wrote a play entitled "Salome" in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then the composer, Richard Strauss wrote an opera based on Wilde's play, which includes the seductive "Dance of the Seven Veils." So we get this picture of a scantily clad young woman named Salome dancing slinkily in front of a bunch of drunken, creepy old men, luring the king to do her bidding. As I think about it, it sounds about right.

What can get lost in all of those accretions is a focus on John the Baptist. After all, he's the one who lost his head!

Herod had put John in prison because John had confronted him about his unlawful marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife. But that apparently was all Herod intended to do to John. Jail-time was adequate punishment from Herod's point of view, at least according to Mark. The story even says that Herod saw John to be a righteous and holy man. You could argue he even protected John. Perhaps he thought John was safer in prison than out among the angry mobs. Who knows? What seems clear is that Herod was drawn to John; he "liked to

listen to him,” the story says. The point here is not to make Herod out to be a nice guy. He most likely wasn’t. In fact, Matthew casts Herod in a much more sinister light in his version of this story. But Mark suggests Herod was at least conflicted about John. Much the same way Pilate was conflicted about Jesus. Hmm. Maybe there’s a connection here. Both Herod and Pilate have mixed feelings about their respective prisoners, their respective truth-tellers, their imprisoned prophets.

In Mark’s story, Herodias, not Herod, is the one who is out to do John in. She’s not perplexed or intrigued at all by him at all. She’s just enraged, and wants him dead, out of the picture. And she knows how to force the hand of the only one with the power to accomplish her dastardly deed. She appeals to Herod’s pride when he promises, in front of a crowd of guests, to do whatever the dancing daughter asks. She gets the Baptist’s head on a platter.

The parallels with Jesus’ crucifixion are not lost. In both cases, there is a goading crowd, who inspires the evil act. In both cases, there is an authority with the sole power to make a decision about the prisoner’s fate. In both cases, that authority makes the decision to end the prisoner’s life despite the fact that he seems to have a personal desire to spare him. In both cases, a holy man, a truth-teller, is executed in order to satisfy a group of people, an angry mob in the case of Jesus, and a bunch of drunken guests in the case of John.\*

Mark seems to be telling us this story to make plain the risk every prophet always faces, indeed, the risk every follower of Christ always faces who takes his message on the road. A prophet’s job is to shine the light of truth in the face of those who abuse authority, who see themselves as above the law, or benefitting from unjust laws. And that’s risky business. John confronts Herod about his adultery. Jesus rides into Jerusalem with a band of rag-tag followers shouting Hosannas, directly confronting Pilate who is perhaps riding with a military parade of the Roman State. John Lewis marches across an Alabama bridge with hundreds of people holding up a mirror to police sent out to enforce racist laws and gets his head bashed for it. Protesters across this country confront the evil of white supremacy in the face of neo-Nazis and xenophobes. In every case, truth-tellers risk their lives. In too many cases, someone dies. As I said, the story is not pretty.

Not all prophets die, of course. But many suffer for their willingness to tell the truth. Who are the prophets in our land today? Are we willing to protect them? Who is willing to hold the mirror of truth before the face of those in power? Who is willing to follow Jesus to the cross?

These comparisons are identified and drawn out by Rene Gerard in *I Saw Satan Fall Like Lightning*.