

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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My body still remembers, at least a little bit, what it felt like when, just under two years ago, I happened to check my phone while my wife and I were at a fundraising gala downtown. I noticed I had a missed call and a text from a neighbor and friend who was letting us know something tragic had happened: her partner had suffered a cardiac episode the day before and was on a ventilator. Absolute unbelief and total astonishment settled in pretty quickly as I disorientingly attempted to navigate dinner and drinks with strangers as well as take in what I just learned. It's funny what the body remembers.

Joe's accident wasn't immediately fatal. He ended up hanging on for another 3 weeks or so which left time for something quite special to be organized, a bit of light breaking in so much darkness. Darkness that had unexpectedly overshadowed us, and demanded we deal with it. It's something I've never been a part of before or since. On December 1, we gathered at the hospital to do what's known as an honor walk, a walk that pays tribute to an organ donor before an operation takes place. Joe came down the elevator with some hospital staff, where we greeted him. It was my first time seeing Joe since the accident, and my last on this side of glory. And gathered around his bed, we walked down a hallway packed with nurses, doctors, and other employees who watched us process while Niel Young's *Heart of Gold* played on a bluetooth speaker. And when we reached the end, we said our goodbyes as Joe was taken away, giving life even in the midst of death.

Now I don't at all want to over-romanticize this story. It certainly wasn't a happy day. And beautiful isn't quite the right word either. At least for myself, I am honored that I was able to take part in something I've settled on calling a holy and sacred act, when for a moment, time stood still as we honored my friend for his gift. A bit of hope in the midst of tragedy and loss we weren't prepared for.

In Mark's gospel, we're presented with a really dark and harrowing story, and one that likely resembles the plot of a movie or novel more than it does the stuff of our everyday lives. And we come to this story in sort of a roundabout way. The majority of this story is told as a flashback. The reason we have this story in the first place, is because of everything leading up to this point in Mark's gospel. Mark has been telling us about all that Jesus said and did as he brought the Kingdom of God to earth; about his healings, about how he set people free, his teachings about what God is like. And then in last week's reading, Jesus felt his disciples were ready to be sent out into the world to do those very same things as he sent them out two by two.

And now in today's reading, all of this beautiful liberating kingdom work has grown so much that the halls of power can no longer ignore it. Jesus is no longer some unknown carpenter turned rabbi. His work has reached the ears of those who wield power and wealth and tread on the powerless. Enter our main character, Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great (Herod the Great

being the Herod we find in the opening pages of Matthew's gospel who infamously ordered the merciless slaughter of all babies two years old and under in an attempt to get rid of baby Jesus - so fragile was his ego). Scholars will point out that our Herod, Herod Antipas, was what was known as a tetrarch - a Roman appointed governor given as close to free reign as you can get, in this case over the region of Galilee.

So stunning was the work Jesus was doing, that Herod feels compelled to make sense of it. How is this even possible? How could this Jesus be responsible for these healings, these miracles, even controlling a storm with a few words? So Herod and his people begin to make some guesses, all of which were incorrect. Maybe it's because of Elijah, some say. Or maybe a different prophet from Israel's history? But for whatever reason, perhaps because he's triggered by his past, Herod concludes (again, incorrectly) that this has to be the work of John the Baptist - that he is risen from the dead, and that John's powers are at work in Jesus. This conclusion, then, leads us to a flashback to show just how it could be that John became dead in the first place.

And this scene isn't a fun one to read. It's not a feel good summer vibe beach read here. To be honest, praying through this passage left me feeling kind of gross. This story is thick with carelessness, thoughtlessness, vanity, self-centeredness, and a disregard for life, particularly for those on the outside and on the margins.

And there are so many things we could consider here. Of course, there's John the Baptist: We might think about ways we're called to speak truth to power, and specifically, (as one commentator pointed out), what it means to consider the costs involved.¹

Or we might consider Herodias, Herod's wife, and the power of what a grudge can do to us.

We could sit with Herod, his conflictedness, his vexation that maybe he hoped would just go away, which was buried only until it begged to be dealt with. How, when it was time for him to finally make a decision, in the end, vanity, selfish preservation, and an inability to be tethered to what mattered most in the moment won out. How as the rich and powerful and corrupt partied, a soldier made his way to the prison, and a life was taken in cruelty.

But for me, I'm enamored with John's disciples, and how they chose to respond to circumstances far outside their control; how they chose to deal with the news that their friend and leader had been murdered.

Because it begs the question of us: How do we, as followers of Jesus, respond when the world is full of uncontrollable darkness, power, and lust? What does a faithful imagination look like? How does the good news look good in a situation like this?

¹ Yust, Karen Marie. "Mark 6:14-29: Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2009, p. 238.

Well, if it hadn't been for commentators, I honestly would have missed or completely forgotten how Mark's story ends, which is where I think the key lies. The final verse simply reads,

"When his disciples heard about it; they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb."

New Testament scholar Mark Skinner rightly encourages us to "consider the courage required to approach Herod Antipas's people and request the body, thereby declaring allegiance to John and the movement he led."² Skinner also calls it an act of "faithful resistance and courageous hope."³

Because, as Cheryl Bridges Johns points out, as much as this story beckons us to make space for the dark realities that fill our world, we're also invited to consider the ways that death and abusive power don't have the last word. We don't get to erase or delete tragedy. We still have to sit with it.⁴ We're invited to figure out how light can poke and bleed through the darkness, and intermingle with it.

And whether it's an honor walk that reminds us of life in the midst of death, a burial for a friend and leader that calls us to courage in the midst of despotic rulers, or a simple meal of bread and wine so freely given, we are reminded of hope, love, and goodness.

The truth is, we gather each Sunday to worship, the pinnacle of which isn't a song, a Scripture, and thank God, not a homily. We celebrate a meal together in which we remember the brutal way Jesus was killed by power; and that, somehow, out of this death, all things are made new. Because worship in itself is a hopeful act of resistance that is centered on a brutal execution we remember each week.

And as we remember that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and that Christ will come again, may we resist death and all its friends, standing defiantly, clinging to hope.

Amen.

²<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-15-2/commentary-on-mark-614-29-6>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Johns, Cheryl Bridges. "Mark 6:14-29: Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2009, p. 241.