

# Being Prophetic is Risky Business

## The Beheading of John the Baptist

Mark 6:14-29  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The first four books in the New Testament – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – are called, as you know, gospels. The word “gospel” is from the Greek word that simply means “good news.” The authors of these four books sought to share the good news of the story and meaning of the life and ministry of Jesus, and the implications all that has on those who follow Jesus.

This morning's assigned lectionary Gospel lesson, however, is the gruesome tale of the beheading of the New Testament prophet John the Baptist. What a dismal story! Where's the good news in that? And why do you suppose it is an assigned lectionary text?

You have to admit, though, that it has all the marks of a really dynamic story: vivid and dramatic details, an adulterous ruler, a scheming woman, a dancing girl, palace intrigue, and a violent, gory death. Whoever thinks the Bible is boring just isn't looking hard enough!

**Unlike any other story in the New Testament, the beheading of John the Baptist by Herod is also recorded by a secular historian of the time, named Josephus.** It is this first century Jewish historian, for instance, who is the source of the name the dancing girl in his account - Salome.

You may be familiar with the more legendary elements of this tale. Her performance is later elaborated into the famous ‘dance of the seven veils.’ (Notice, however, that the Bible never mentions anything about veils, let alone seven of them.) This story theme has been repeated with endless variations, including an opera by Richard Strauss, and even an old Hollywood Western connected with the town of Salome, Arizona, starring Rita Hayworth, entitled, “Salome, Where She Danced.” (I'm afraid I missed that one.)

You may also be interested in knowing that **this is the only story in Mark's Gospel that does not have as its subject Jesus or his disciples.** Well what about Joseph and Mary, you may be wondering? Those stories are found only in Matthew and Luke. This gospel starts not with the birth narratives, but with the baptism of the adult Jesus – by none other than John the Baptist.

As to why this story is included as an assigned lectionary text, I think it's because of its unique message about **the consequences of being prophetic** – of being a prophet and speaking out. In relation to discipleship and ministry, then, **those with prophetic voices should not be surprised when political and religious power structures try to silence them.** How many times have we witnessed that in the past 2000 years, especially in the area of seeking equality for all people? The assassination of Martin

Luther King, Jr. is one of the greatest examples in our lifetime. The assassinations of world leaders like Abraham Lincoln, Anwar Sadat, and Gandhi also fall into the same category.

Perhaps we first need to back up just a bit, however, and reflect upon what it means to be a prophet, or to have a prophetic voice and message. **From a biblical perspective, prophets are messengers sent by God not to predict the future, as many believe, but rather to speak a word of warning to those in power. They warn of ensuing consequences if those in power continue on their present course of action, and if the righteous ways of God are not followed. Unlike a fortune-teller, they are truth-tellers.**

Those in authority usually don't like a truth-teller telling the truth about them, especially in public. In one respect, then, **the prophet acts as a kind of whistle-blower.** Even to this day, those who live in places that don't value free speech often imprison or even kill truth-tellers in order to silence them. Perhaps this is what the world has been witnessing this past month as leaders in Iran have tried to silence those who had the courage to criticize and protest their recent elections. But since we can't officially do that to protesters in modern-day America, **those in positions of power and authority tend to resort to the tactic of trying to defame and discredit the reputation of truth-tellers/whistle-blowers so that others won't believe them.**

Contrary to this tendency, I think one of the most interesting selections of *Time* magazine's "Person of the Year" came in 2002. They named three whistle-blowers. *Time* stated, "By risking everything to blow the whistle at WorldCom, Enron, and the FBI, [these three] reminded us of what American courage and American values are all about."

Of course, **one person's truth-telling whistle-blower (who stands up for what is right and shines a blaring light on injustice) is another person's trouble-maker and leak informant.** If you keep up with current events, especially in the business and political world, you know how common this has become of late. But when you look at the stories of lives of biblical prophets, we learn that **'shooting the messenger' has always been a common response by those in power.**

In our Old Testament Lesson we heard a story about the prophet Amos. He has been called by God to confront the powers that prevailed in the northern kingdom, called Israel, warning them of God's impending judgment upon this presently very prosperous nation. Amos was from the southern kingdom, called Judah, and Amaziah, the high priest, basically tells him to go home and mind his own business. (I know what would happen if someone from Texas came up here to Oklahoma and started telling you what to do.)

Amos has an interesting reply. In effect he says, "Do you think I like being a messenger of doom? Don't you realize that I would *rather* be at home minding my own business?" Or, as Tevye says so poignantly in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* when besieged by troubles, "It is nice to be your chosen people, God...but couldn't you choose somebody else for a while?"

This is basically true for all prophets, ancient and modern. Instead of living a privileged life filled with safety and security, prophets are quite vulnerable and are placed in considerable peril. And why is that? Again, **those who have high stakes in maintaining the status quo want truth-tellers silenced because they are a threat to their power and authority.**

Which brings us back to the story of the beheading of John the Baptist. One of the more fascinating historical aspects of today's Gospel lesson is the **tangled web of**

**inter-relationships in the Herod family.** Let me do a little untangling (which, I realize in advance, will make things only more complex.)

When Jesus was born, Herod the Great was king of Judea and all Palestine. He was the king who was responsible for the massacre of the children in Bethlehem. Herod the Great was married ten times. First he married Doris. They had a son, Antipater, whom Herod later executed when he thought his son was trying to usurp his power.

Then he married Mariamne, the Hasmonean, with whom he had two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, both of which were also executed by their father, Herod the Great. Before Aristobulus was killed, however, he had a daughter, **Herodias** – who is the villainess of Mark's gospel story.

Herod the Great's third wife was also named Mariamne, called the Boesthusian. By her he had a son named **Herod Philip** - this one got to live. Herod Philip married Herodias, who, being the daughter of his half-brother, Aristobulus, meant that he married his own niece. Herod Philip and Herodias had a daughter named **Salome**, who is the girl who danced in Mark's story. **But Herod Philip is not the Herod in this story.**

Herod the Great married for a fourth time, to Malthace, by whom he had two sons, Archelaus and **Herod Antipas**, who is the Herod of our passage and the ruler of the region of Galilee after Herod the Great dies in the year 4 BCE. As the story goes, Herod Antipas goes to visit his half-brother, Herod Philip and his family (Herodias, and Salome) on his way to Rome. During the visit, he has an affair with Herodias. Herodias leaves her husband, Herod Philip, and marries Herod Antipas, who divorces his first wife.

If you're following this at all, and I'm not sure if that's even possible, then you've realized that **Herodias is at one-in-the-same-time the niece and sister-in-law and now the wife of Herod Antipas.**

But it doesn't stop there. Herod the Great married a fifth time, to Cleopatra of Jerusalem. They had a son named Philip the Tetrarch. Guess who he marries? Salome. Salome was both his niece (because she was the daughter of his half-brother, Herod Philip) and also his grand-niece (because she was the daughter of his niece, Herodias.) Remember when "Peyton Place" seemed scandalous?

I provided a genealogical flow chart of all this to those who attended the Adult Church School class this morning. I'll get you one if you're interested.

At any rate, **the gospel writer Mark tells us that because John the Baptist publicly rebuked Herod Antipas for marrying his half-brother's wife (which is strictly forbidden in Leviticus), he was arrested.** The historian, Josephus, claims John was arrested because Herod was frightened by John's popularity. Since John was a source of unrest and subversion, this seems the most likely reason for his arrest.

While John is in prison, Herod Antipas throws a lavish birthday party for himself. The party seems typical for its time. The women are in an adjoining room. This is men's-only party. That is why Salome must go next door to consult her mother after she was called in to dance.

In a classic case of **losing one's good judgment and making promises which one becomes sorry for later** (ever been in that predicament?), Herod promises anything to Salome after her dance. Salome goes to her mother for help in making her decision. The head of John the Baptist is the request. Salome goes back to Herod with this request and adds the part of having the head served on a platter. (Perhaps you've wondered where that saying came from.)

According to Mark's story, Herod wishes he didn't have to kill John. But he thinks more of the oath he has sworn, and his honor before the assembled guests, than he does of the prophet whom he admittedly admired. Herod **feared what other people might think and say. He didn't want to look bad or weak in front of his friends.** (Ever been in that situation?) He went ahead and did something for which he later regretted because he did not have the moral courage to do what was right. (This is starting to sound like a Baptist sermon, isn't it?!)

But perhaps that's the best connection to our day and time – having the moral courage to say and do what is right, even if there might be consequences to pay. That includes us as individuals, and also us as a congregation. **That's what it means to be a prophet and have a prophetic voice and message – to have the courage to say and do what is right, even in the face of protest by those in power or those in the majority.**

Unlike the "don't worry, be happy" message of many Christian churches today, Mark reminds us that true discipleship is not always the easiest path. **The gospels never promise us that the journey of prophetic discipleship will be smooth and free of controversy.** For by the time we get to the end of today's biblical text we realize that there is no happy ending to this particular story. Not so much because of its gory brutality as for the misuse and abuse of power, and the structures of injustice it displays - structures that are alive and well today, including inside our Christian denominations.

**Ultimately, then, this is a story about silencing the prophetic cry for justice.** Yet, that did not stop John the Baptist, nor Jesus or the disciples from crying out for justice, nor should it stop us, even though there are still a lot of Herods out there.

**Being prophetic always has been and always will be risky business. It is rarely the easy path of ministry. Yet, many of the congregations that truly make a difference in society see it as a very important part of their calling by God. These churches usually aren't the largest or have the most money, yet their prophetic message often has a much wider scope of influence than they imagine. This is certainly the case of the influence that this congregation has throughout this presbytery.**

So, just how prophetic will College Hill choose to be in the future of our ministry? Though I don't want any heads served up on silver platters, including my own, I stand firm in what I perceive to be a strong desire for us to continue to have a prophetic voice in this city, and beyond – giving voice to the call for justice for all.

Amen.