

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

July 11, 2021

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## *What's the Good News?*

Mark 6:14-29 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

What was your most memorable birthday party? Perhaps a surprise made it extraordinary, or the people in attendance caused it to be remarkable. As we get older, the best thing about a birthday party may be the fact that we had a birthday!

When he heard the buzz about Jesus, Herod Antipas' thoughts raced back to his most memorable birthday party. He was certain this Jesus people were talking about was really John the Baptizer come back to haunt him. But before we go back to Herod's party, there are some things you should know. Keep in mind that, although Herod's family and the party itself sound like a script for *The Godfather*, most of this story has been historically corroborated.

Herod Antipas, the Herod from our Gospel reading today, married Herodias. Herodias was the granddaughter of Herod the Great. Her first husband was her uncle, Herod Philip, another son of Herod the Great. After either deserting her husband or divorcing him, she married her first husband's half-brother, who also was her uncle<sup>1</sup>. (Remember the song, "I'm my own Grandpa?!")

The legality of the dissolution of Herodias' marriage to Herod Philip was questionable. Not to mention marrying your uncle! Two of your uncles!

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<sup>1</sup> Herod Antipas comes from a very dysfunctional family! His father, Herod the Great, tried to kill the baby Jesus. His nephew, Herodias' brother, Herod Agrippa I, killed the apostle James, and arrested Simon Peter.

Herodias' marriage to Herod Antipas violated Jewish law. "You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is your brother's nakedness. If a man takes his brother's wife, it is impurity," the laws of Leviticus say.

John the Baptizer reminded Herod of his transgression. The last we heard of John, he had baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, and was arrested. Now we know who did it and why. Herodias was so furious, she wanted to kill John. Herod didn't. He knew that John "was a righteous and holy man.... He liked to listen to him." Despite John telling Herod the harsh reality about himself, he paid attention to what John told him about Jesus, about salvation, and about truth.

Herodias' got her wish granted for Herod's birthday! Their daughter, also named Herodias, also known as Salome, danced up a storm at the celebration. Grinning from ear to ear, Herod told his daughter, "You were great! How can I thank you? Do you want half my kingdom?" But the daughter wanted to make her mom's dreams come true. She asked for John's head on a platter. This disturbed Herod, but he had, after all, taken an oath. Then, too, he made the promise in front of his guests. He didn't want to lose face. You could say, that's when things came to a head. Herod put his reputation above what was right. John's head was presented on a serving dish, just like one of the courses at the banquet.

This is the story our lectionary gives us for this morning. It's a horrifying story in which Jesus does not appear. Do you notice how Pastor Jon chose this Sunday to be in Minnesota? My training, and Martin Luther, taught me to look for both the law and the gospel in our Sunday readings. As one of my colleagues asked on an ELCA clergy FaceBook page, where is the good news in our reading today? Where do we find salvation? This is a story that puts our capacity for brutality and evil on full display.

Can we hear it? Can we listen to things that make us squirm in our seats? Are we guests at a party who have the ugly truth of injustice served to us on a silver platter, and do nothing?

Every day we are confronted with brutal realities. We see people walking the street carrying trash bags that contain everything they own. People who have no permanent home, not because they are lazy, but because something happened to put them there. Combat veterans with mental illness, and people who were overwhelmed with medical bills are among those you see. People you may not see are women who have escaped an abuser. Often, they have children with them, too.

Sometimes, these homeless women and children become victims of human trafficking. Victims of human trafficking can be used either for labor or for sex. Victims are U.S. Citizens and non-citizens, children and adults, and all gender identities. The United States ranks as one of the worst countries globally for human trafficking, and among the states, Virginia ranks the 15<sup>th</sup> highest.<sup>2</sup> This is the truth. Are you squirming in your seat?

Things happen in this world that do not seem bearable. Sometimes, we don't hear good news. Maybe this is what we are to take from our Gospel lesson today. Maybe our eyes need to be exposed to brutal truths and senseless tragedies so that we can be a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves, change the things we can change, and help those we are able to help.

When the disciples heard about John's murder, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb. Afterwards, they went and told Jesus the story of Herod's power and ego surpassing the things John told him about God. Jesus, needing time to rest and process all that had happened, led them away to another place. But crowds showed up, and Jesus did what he was

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/victims-services/human-trafficking>

sent to do. He taught about God's love and forgiveness, and then fed the hungry people.

~Pastor Cheryl Ann Griffin