

Good News in Bad Times

Mark 6:14-29

If a preacher were flipping through the Bible looking for “101 Stories to Inspire Great Preaching,” he or she would probably not linger long over this story of the martyrdom of John the Baptist. It isn't a very uplifting story – as a matter of fact, it is a ‘downer’. The good guys lose, and Mark depicts the loss in gruesome terms. The king not only has John the Baptist killed, but he passes his head around on a platter. We know that things like that happen, but we would just as soon hear about something else when we come to church, especially during the summer-time. We deal with enough unhappy things six days a week, and we would rather hear something encouraging on Sunday.

But this story is in the Bible – not only in the Bible, but in the Gospels – books that we treat with special reverence, because they tell us about the life of Jesus. The story of John's death is in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Mark tells the story in more detail than do Matthew and Luke. He underscores for us its importance not only because of its detail but also by its placement here in chapter 6.

When we first read this story, it seems pretty grim, but when we study it in more detail, we realize that there is something more here than the death of a martyr. This is also a story of hope – an encouraging story for difficult times. It takes some digging to learn that, but learn it we can.

This is a story set inside another story. Mark has been telling the story of Jesus sending the Twelve on a mission – a very successful mission – and then he interrupts that story to tell this story of the death of John – and then he comes back to the story of the Twelve, which he concludes with this verse:

“The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught” (v. 30).

The apostles told Jesus what they had done! What had they done? Just before telling us about John the Baptist, Mark told us that the Twelve had called people to repent, had cast out many demons, and had anointed many sick people and cured them (vv. 12-13). In other words, these apostles had been doing great things for Jesus. Mark interrupts that happy story to tell us the grim story of the death of John the Baptist.

Why would he do that? Why would he do it here? Why would he start telling a big success story, and interrupt it with this terrible story about John's death? Why would he include the gruesome details – Herod and his guests passing around John's head on a platter at their banquet?

As nearly as we can tell, Mark did that as a way of saying, “Look! Terrible things happen! Nothing could be more terrible than this gruesome story of John's death! But don't be fooled! That is not the whole story! Something important is going on in the background while John is being martyred, and that something important is God conquering evil -- disciples casting out demons.”

He is saying, Yes, terrible things happen -- but wonderful things happen too! And the wonderful things trump the terrible things. God is at work in the world, and we should never wonder who is going to win. This story of John's death -- set inside the story of the apostles' successful mission – promises that God will win – and God's people will win.

That doesn't mean that it will be easy. When Mark sets this story of John's death into the middle of the story of the Twelve casting out demons, he is reminding us that bad things happen – that bad things happen even to good people – and that the bad things that happen to us are not necessarily God's punishment for our sins. John the Baptist wasn't doing something wrong when they killed him – he was doing something right.

Herod imprisoned John because John criticized Herod for marrying his brother's wife. That upset Herod a little bit, but it upset his wife, Herodias, a whole lot! She wanted to kill John. It is very possible that Herod imprisoned John just to keep him away from Herodias. Mark tells us that Herod tried to protect John -- that he liked to hear him talk. He saw something good – something holy - something true – in John, and wanted to protect him from the wicked queen.

But, then, one night Herodias got her chance. Her daughter danced a dance that pleased Herod a whole lot. I don't even want to think about what kind of dance it was. Any other father would have put a stop to it immediately, but not Herod! In a drunken spirit he told the girl that she was wonderful, and offered her anything she wanted – up to half of his kingdom.

So the girl did what young girls often do when faced with a great decision – she went to get her mother’s advice. What should she ask? The answer was easy! She should ask for John's head. And so she did – even adding her own touch – she not only asked for John’s head, but asked for it on a platter!

Even Herod was horrified at the idea – but he was also trapped. All the important people in his kingdom were at that banquet, and they had heard his offer – and they had also heard the daughter’s request. Herod found himself between the devil – literally – and the deep blue sea. He didn’t want to kill John, but he also didn’t want to embarrass himself in front of his friends. And so he did kill John – just as he and Pilate would later kill Jesus.

But, in the background, the apostles were out there on their mission – preaching – calling people to repentance – casting out demons – healing the sick. God was not absent, and evil was not winning the race. Yes, one good man was being murdered, but dozens or hundreds were being saved.

Mark’s church needed to hear that! By the time Mark wrote this Gospel, the church was suffering terrible persecution. Christians were being imprisoned – even killed – not because they had done something wrong, but because they had done something right. I believe that Mark wrote this story within a story to reassure them. Yes, bad things were happening, but they should not doubt that good things were happening too. God was at work in the world, and everything would come out all right in the end.

We need to hear that too. If life was difficult for Christians in Mark’s day, it is often difficult for us as well. We live in a society that is also deaf to words like the ones John was speaking. There is a tendency for many people today, maybe you work with some or live with some whose motto is “live hearty and party” without thinking about the shallowness of living so to speak only for the weekend.

As a culture we are so casual in the way we view relationships, casing off one romantic liaison for another when we become bored with the current partner. Fidelity is a an undervalued virtue while we celebrate the lifestyles of modern day Herod’s and Herodias’ who live extravagantly and change partners with a regularity that would even make Herod and Herodias look virtuous.

We also face the challenges and threats that are of a more personal nature. Living with chronic pain, dealing with a re-occurring cancer, either in our life or in the life of someone close to us, seeing those we love we are confronted by the effect of aging can lead us to perhaps wonder about how Jesus is present in the world. It is worth noting that in Matthew's gospel we are told that John wondered too. In Matthew 11 he sends his disciples to Jesus with the question: "Are you the one to come or should we look for another?" Somehow John thought that following Jesus would be different from this. And Jesus answers John's questions by telling him to look at the signs of how God is present. The sick are healed, the dead are raised and where ever I go the good news is being preached. Jesus wanted John to get the big picture. This is what Mark wants us to see too.

Looking at the signs. We hear on the news lots of bad news about Africa don't we. And bad news there is aplenty. HIV/AIDS, poverty, corrupt governments, and violence. And yet we seem to hear very little about how the church is growing in that part of the world. Do you know in parts of Nigeria there are Anglican congregations that have more members than do some dioceses in Canada and the USA? 75% of Christians now live in Africa, South East Asia and South America. Places where in the face much suffering and indeed martyrdom the church has grown at a rate unparalleled by anything we have ever seen in Canada. There is a story within a story here that the popular media doesn't report. They just tell us the bad news and leave the good news alone..

When faced with danger or pain, it is difficult to believe that there is anything right about the world – or our lives. But the story of John's martyrdom – set inside the story of the successful mission of the apostles – tells us that God is at work – and it tells us that God will win. This story reassures us that, if we walk with God, in the long run, all will be well. That is an important promise to remember when we are in danger -- when we are suffering.

I don't know if the name Helen Keller means anything to you or not. Hers was an amazing story. As a toddler, she suffered some sort of disease that left her blind and deaf. She grew into childhood completely cut off from sight and sound. Her parents tried everything to communicate with her, but were largely unsuccessful.

Then her parents invited Anne Sullivan to work with young Helen, and Anne tried something that she called "finger spelling." She devised a code that she could tap into

Helen's hand. She tapped a word for "doll" and handed Helen a doll. Helen realized that Anne was trying to say something, but couldn't understand what. Then Anne tried to teach Helen the word for "cake," but again Helen failed to understand. The two of them worked together for a month, gradually developing a bond and friendship – but Helen still couldn't grasp what Anne was trying to teach her.

And then, one day, Anne tapped the word for "water" and then pumped water from an old hand pump over Helen's hand -- and Helen "got it." Her face lit up with joy because, for the first time in her young life, she had a way to communicate with the people around her. It was an enormous breakthrough, and it changed Helen's life – it changed Anne's life – and it changed the lives of millions who heard Helen's story.

Helen Keller became famous, because she was a woman of enormous spiritual depth. She wrote things that encouraged people who were having a hard time. People knew how much she had suffered – and how much she had overcome – and they found themselves very open to hear Helen's counsel. As an adult, Helen said many wonderful things that helped many people. One of them was this. She said:

"Although the world is very full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it."

Any of us could say those words, but they have real power when they come from the lips of one who has genuinely suffered and genuinely overcome the suffering. This is also what Mark tells us by giving us a story within a story. It is good news for bad times. News that declares:

"Although the world is very full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it."

AMEN