

“The Head of John the Baptist”

Pennside Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Duquette

John the Baptist isn't the only one who loses his head in our lesson from Mark. The scene is like something from the Game of Thrones: Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great (one of many by Herod's 8 wives), is manipulated and maneuvered by his wife Herodias who allows her daughter to be exploited so that she can gain the necessary leverage to obtain her revenge: *Mark 6:25 (NRSV)* “... give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

Herod could do the right thing. He could stand strong. He could deny this request as being well beyond the “up to half my kingdom” he promised. His distress shows that he knows what he should do, but he lacks the capacity to do it. He goes along to get along to his lasting shame and ruin.

Herod is given an opportunity, and he misses it. Herod misses the message John the Baptist is proclaiming; he misses the first of his two opportunities to recognize that Jesus is the Messiah, the resurrection and the life. He misses his moment because he fears what people will think more than he fears God.

We're not kings (or wannabe kings). The power of life and death is not in our hands, but we do have the capacity to do the right thing and the wrong thing. We do make choices and those choices have consequences for good and for ill. Like Herod, we suffer and we cause suffering because we make the wrong choice at the wrong time for the wrong reason. We let anxiety rule our lives. We lose our heads and though everything within us tells us, “This is a bad idea,” we give in and give the order, “Bring me the head of John the Baptist.”

1. Fear and Loathing in Tiberias

Tiberias was Herod's town. He built it – on a cemetery. The location is lovely, but it was unclean and the people objected. He built it on the shores of the Sea of Galilee just a few miles from Capernaum, so it didn't take long for the activities there of Jesus and his disciples to come to Herod's attention.

Herod was paying attention; he was on full alert because he was in the midst of the political crisis that would bring him to ruin.

Mark tells us that John the Baptist was rebuking Herod for marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. The historian Flavius Josephus gives us further background; Herod's first wife whom he had cast aside was the daughter of Aretas IV of Nabataea. (If you've seen pictures of the great city of Petra, which was featured in “Indiana Jones and the Last

“The Head of John the Baptist”

Pennside Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Duquette

Crusade,” you’ve seen the capital of the Nabatean kingdom). Aretas did not take this slight lightly and waged war with Herod, so when John the Baptist was condemning Herod’s infidelity he was undermining Herod’s already shaky political support in the midst of a life and death struggle.

Perhaps this was the cause for Herod’s birthday party “for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.”¹ He needed to win friends and influence people. He needed to shore up his support. He needed to keep himself safe, because he had good reason to be afraid.

Add to this the fact that Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great; Herod put wives and sons to death to preserve his own political power. He grew up surrounded by betrayal and intrigue; the instinct for self-preservation was refined at an early age; another reason to be afraid.

Herod did not know how to trust. He did not know how to believe. His entire life was marked by anxiety, doubt, and fear.

To translate Herod’s context into our own: Herod was facing a professional crisis and a personal crisis. He felt threatened at work. He felt threatened at home. He would do anything to get a little peace. Anything.

This does not absolve Herod of responsibility for the death of John the Baptist, but it does invite us to consider how our lives are marked by anxiety, doubt and fear, the damage done, and how we can overcome it.

My goal this morning is to empower you to cope with the fear and anxiety in your life so that you make the most of the opportunities God sends your way for salvation; that is – abundant life that overcomes anxiety and fear and experiences the peace and power of God in your daily living and for all eternity.

Herod had the opportunity, but he was afraid to take it. Today, you have the opportunity. Take it! Your life need not be a living hell defined by fear and loathing in Tiberias.

2. Keep Your Head On Your Shoulders

Billy Joel captures the way Herod loses his head:

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Mk 6:21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

“The Head of John the Baptist”

Pennside Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Duquette

Because you had to be a big shot, didn't ya
You had to open up your mouth
You had to be a big shot, didn't ya,
All your friends were so knocked out
You had to have the last word, last night
You know what everything's about
You had to have a white hot spotlight
You had to be a big shot last night.

Herod had to be a big shot; he had to impress his guests so they would continue to support him. He was in a fight for his life, and he needed them.

Or so he thought. Anxiety limits our vision. We cannot see that there are other possibilities; the overwhelming threat we see may be nothing at all, as a result we miss the opportunities God gives us to move in the direction of life and peace.

Herod enjoyed listening to John. Yes, hearing him rebuke him for marrying Herodias was uncomfortable, but there was something about him. After he put John to death, when Jesus came to his attention, he was sure that Jesus was a resurrected John; resurrected to stand in judgment over him, because for Herod resurrection meant judgment.

Judgment lies at the root of so much of our anxiety. We are sure that God will judge us, because we are judging ourselves. We are sure that the significant people in our lives will judge us, because we are judging ourselves.

What if that weren't true? What if that declaration of pardon we heard a few minutes ago is true? What if we are forgiven and God continually gives us the possibility of a fresh start – no matter what?

And what if God is always with us to bless us and show us the way? What if Paul is right when he exclaims, *Ephesians 1:3–4 (NRSV)* ³ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,* ⁴ *just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.* What if God's will is that we will be saved and live a life of justice, freedom, and peace?

Herod listened to John; if only he had heard him. Herod paid attention to Jesus; if only he had understood.

“The Head of John the Baptist”

Pennside Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Duquette

God was reaching out to him to save him; to invite him to leave behind the “big shot” way of life that was destroying him and enter into God’s eternal life where “all is well, and all is well, and all manners of things shall be well (Julian of Norwich)”.

God was reaching out to Herod; God is reaching out to you. This is the gift of our anxiety; we are anxious for a very good reason; we can’t stay where we are as we are. If we do so, we face a significant threat; a threat that very well may overcome us.

We have to change. We have to change. We have to change. And anxiety provides the energy for change; change in our personal lives and change in our communal lives. Anxiety invites us to surrender our illusions of independence and self-sufficiency. Anxiety opens us to the possibility that the way forward, the way to peace and wholeness, is found in trust; trust in the God who sent John to prepare the way; trust in Jesus who came that we might have life and have it abundantly; trust that God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.

Keep your head on your shoulders; we have to change; and, God is inviting us to believe that with God’s help, we can change.

Everything changes and anything is possible when we choose to trust; we choose to define the challenges in our lives as opportunities to hear God saying to us, “You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.” We choose to accept that while the challenge before us is real, we do not face it alone; we face it with Jesus, who says to us, “I will never leave you or forsake you. I am with you always to the end of the age.” We choose to listen for the whisper of God’s grace in the midst of the sound and fury of fear.

God’s grace gives us choices; God’s grace opens up options and new possibilities; trusting in the grace of God in the midst of the anxiety keeps our head on our shoulders.

Herod had the opportunity, but he was afraid to take it. Today, you have the opportunity. Take it! Keep your head on your shoulders. Choose to trust. Choose to listen and hear and believe: You are not alone. You can do this. Change is hard, and you can do this.

You can because Jesus is our Savior and King; believe in him and you can conquer the anxiety and fear that caused Herod to lose his head, give in to the pressure, and ask for the head of John the Baptist. Amen.