

“Good News from One Messy Story”

Mark 6:14–29

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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There has been a good bit of conversation recently about banning books. While one can certainly understand the need to consider the age appropriateness of some material, the move to ban books because of things like violence, sensuality, or political ideation seems more likely in a fascist state than a democracy. Bans are driven by a fear of difference and/or a desire for control. Dana’s uncle, one of two library deans in her family, wore a shirt with these words, “My library has something to offend everyone.” That seems more like an American ideal.

From time to time, we have talked about this issue in relationship to the church library where we have more things to consider and more freedom in making choices. But in every conversation, we eventually come back to the realization that if we are going to remove or refuse books because of sensuality, violence, or political ideation, the very first book we would have to ban is the Bible.

We tend to think all the bad stuff is found in the Hebrew canon. It’s one reason many of us are not very familiar with it. We want to avoid all this racy, violent material. But it is found in the Christian Testament too, all of it, in fact, in our reading today from Mark. Despite all the criticism it received, *Game of Thrones* has nothing on this Gospel lesson in any of these realms.

There is sensuality here, though perhaps not where we think it is. Throughout church history, much has been made of Herodias’ daughter’s dancing, Salome was probably her name. Her dancing is often pictured or described as erotic, and it may have been. Herod is quite taken by her dancing as are his guests. But we don’t know for certain why, and dancing is not evil in and of itself. In the reading from 2 Samuel, David dances before the ark as an act of worship, though one of his wives, Michal, despises him for it. The text doesn’t say Salome’s dancing is

sensual. The fact that we read the story this way may say more about us and our view of women than it does about Salome.

But while we don't know how Salome dances, we do know Herod has acted inappropriately by marrying his brother's wife, Herodias, and John the baptizer has criticized him publicly for this, it's why he is in prison. And Herod's indiscretions lead to his new wife's hostility toward John that leads to his death. Sexual misconduct plays a prominent role in this story.

So does violence. When Salome wins over Herod with her dancing, and Herod loses his mind and offers to grant whatever request she has, Herodias seizes the opportunity to get rid of her critic and has John not just killed but beheaded.

This is the summer of lost heads in the lectionary. A few weeks ago, the story about David killing Goliath was in the lectionary, though we read the psalm that day instead. But in the larger narrative of 1 Samuel, David does more than kill the giant with a sling shot. I'll just leave it there, since we've already read about one beheading...

So, we have sensuality and violence in our reading, and we have politics. In fact, while we often make a fuss over the sex and violence in this text, power is the most central concern, as it often is. It is all intertwined. Henry Kissinger is reported to have said that power is the ultimate aphrodisiac. But power is the thing that matters most to Herod.

He has the power to arrest John simply because he doesn't like his preaching, and he has the power to put him to death. But his power is limited, he is a puppet, put in place by Rome. And while he appears to be tough, he isn't. The text says he likes to hear John preach, but he doesn't listen to his message. He protects him, out of fear, until he doesn't. He doesn't want to have John killed, but he has made a promise in front of his guests, and he doesn't want to look bad in front of them. All of this is a sign of weakness and vanity.

Somewhere deep down, he knows this. It's why the story begins with the assertion that Herod comes to believe that Jesus is John the baptizer raised from the dead. Herod feels guilt and shame, which makes him better than many sociopathic leaders with no conscience or moral compass. But he never seems to act on his best impulses.

What a story, it's in the Bible, and I'm preaching on it! Why? Because it offers an accurate reflection of real life. The Bible is not a collection of superficial stories about cartoon characters exploring fairy tale concerns for the sake of our entertainment. It's about real life in a nitty-gritty way, which is why it is helpful, and it points to how God might be at work in the midst of it all.

Marilynne Robinson puts it this way in her new book, *Reading Genesis* (p. 3).

The Bible is a theodicy, a meditation on the problem of evil. This being true, it must take account of things as they are. It must acknowledge in a meaningful way the darkest aspects of the reality we experience, and it must reconcile them with the goodness of God and of Being itself against which this darkness stands out so sharply.

It must take account of things as they are... and it must reconcile them with the goodness of God. Indeed.

So, how does this story do this? For one thing, there is insight into the nature and consequences of leadership that is self-obsessed, toxic, and unwilling to listen to truth. It doesn't take much imagination to see the modern parallels to Herod. We might begin with Vladimir Putin, though there are many other possibilities. But here is a man consumed by the lust for power, completely void of conscience, posing as a bully but constantly acting out of fear, like all bullies.

What happens when someone like this is in power? Thousands are slaughtered, lies become the norm, freedoms are restricted, and anyone who criticizes the leader is silenced. We see all of this at work and reject it, but scripture tells us there have always been leaders like this.

Healthy leaders have character and conscience, they care more about the people affected by their leadership than how they come off looking. True strength is found in the capacity for compassion, not brutality; a willingness to acknowledge wrongdoing, not insistence on being right; in short, not being like Herod or Putin in any way.

But this story not only gives us insight into the nature of toxic leadership; it provides models of courageous faith. John is the primary model. His life is devoted to preparing the way for God's realm that Jesus will bring near. He speaks truth to power, no matter what the consequences. His message may seem painfully direct, but people respond to his teaching, even Herod is intrigued. It costs him his life, but John has known this was a risk all along. He trusts in God, no matter what; his commitment is to the truth, no matter what.

And notice how the story ends. After John is beheaded, his disciples ask for his body which they lay in a tomb. They too are models of faith. They too are risking their lives. Unlike Jesus' disciples who run away in fear when he is put to death on a cross, John's disciples do not hide the fact that they are his disciples. One scholar notes a parallel to the thousands who bravely showed up in March to pay their respects outside the church and cemetery in Moscow where Alexei Navalny was mourned and laid to rest. They too took a risk as Azamat in our church can tell you. What are we willing to risk for our beliefs?

But beyond the insight into toxic leadership and the models of courageous faith, this story offers us one additional thing as we think about the all-too-real world in which we live – while the consequences of toxic leadership can be devastating, toxic leaders do not ultimately prevail. In the short run, they may. Hitler has his run of hatred and horror, but how does he end? Attila the Hun dies choking on his own blood. Herod is remembered not as a powerful leader but a bit character, and not a good one, in the most popular story of all time about a man named Jesus and his messenger John. Even in his time, Herod Antipas ends up in exile. Mark calls him a king which he wants to be but never is. In fact, this is what gets him in trouble with the real king.

Sometimes it seems like the worst leaders with the least character rise to the top and there is nothing that can bring them down. History and the witness of Holy Scripture say otherwise. They may get there, but they will fall. Truth and justice will one day prevail. God's ways will not be defeated nor will God be fooled by people who claim to speak and act for God but do not. This is good news at a time like this, whether we get to see it or not, good news from one messy story.