

**The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost**  
**July 11, 2021**  
**The Rev. Elizabeth W. Colton**

The word “gospel” means Good News! And you’d be right in wondering what the Good News might be in this grisly tale. The scene suggests drama and grand opera, and this story has been adapted for both. But what of the Good News of God in Christ? Where does that appear? Or might this be to prepare us all for the next part of Mark’s story which is to come?

If you feel a little perplexed, that would be about right. Last week, we heard about Jesus sending his disciples out on their first missionary journey. And then, all of a sudden, in the middle of the excitement of the disciples going out on their own in Mark’s gospel, there is a gigantic interruption, a very *unpleasant* interruption, and we stop everything and read the horrifying story of the murder of John the Baptist. What’s going on?

There were, as you know a line of Herods. It was a family that got involved in local politics in Israel, and acted as puppet rulers for the Romans. They were all Jews, so they understood the religious ritual, worship, and celebrations of the Jewish people. These religious observances seemed unusual to the Romans, because the Jews believed in only *one* God. The Romans, of course, had a god for everything. They did not understand this one god business, and they needed a local man who understood all this. The Herods were selected because they spoke the local languages, Aramaic and Hebrew, they understood the local customs, and because they were ambitious, eager to curry favors from the Romans in return for selling out their own people. Not a surprise, therefore, that the Herods had a tendency toward violence. An earlier Herod, after the birth of Jesus, didn’t know where to find this “king” the Magi were searching for, so he just ordered that all male children under two be slaughtered. In our church calendar, this is called “The Slaughter of the Innocents,” for innocent they certainly were. The Herod in our story is Herod Antipas. Once, while traveling to Rome, he stopped over at the home of his half brother, met his half brother’s wife, Herodias, and began an affair with her. In time he divorced his wife and married Herodias, who brought to the marriage a daughter also called Herodias, but most of us know her as Salomé, a name given by the great historian Josephus. It is not hard to imagine that Herod, who had admired his brother’s wife, also greatly admired his new step-daughter, enough to find her attractive and provocative. Knowing what women might be appropriate for him was not his strong point.

And so Herod throws a birthday party for himself, inviting all the politically connected people – those of his court, officers of local government, and the important leaders of the region of Galilee. He had previously ordered the arrest of John the Baptist. Now, there is no question that John was attracting crowds in the wilderness at the River Jordan, where he exhorted the people to get new lives, to confess their sins and start cooperating with God in the work of birthing God’s reign. John was a threat to the social order, getting the people all excited, and so of course Herod had him arrested. It didn’t hurt the case that John continually warned Herod, and anyone else that would listen, that Herod was living in sin with his living brother’s wife. The Book of Leviticus expressly forbade it. You would think that Herod would want to arrest John just to silence him, especially after such personal attacks, but Herod was also inexplicably drawn to John. He sensed that John was a holy and righteous man; perhaps he even admired John showing courageous backbone and moral fiber – in short, he was perplexed. But he found himself unable to order the death of John, perplexed as found himself, and so John just languished in jail.

Until, of course, the eve of Herod’s birthday. Herod continued to be perplexed, or perhaps just plain drunk, because he called for his stepdaughter to come and dance for the men, because the women, of course, were next door at their own party. It was an extremely inappropriate thing to do. One

wonders how his wife felt, at the party next door, when her husband called for her young and vulnerable daughter to go in alone and entertain the men, men who had drunk too much wine. And her worst fears were realized, because we are told that this daughter so pleased the men with her dancing that Herod foolishly promised her anything she wished, equal to half his kingdom. Imagine such a promise! And so the young girl goes next door to ask her mother, and her mother sees a chance to get back at this Baptist for telling everyone her husband had unlawfully married her. She tells her daughter to ask for his head on a platter, at once.

And now, “perplexed” takes on new meaning for Herod. Should he embarrass himself in front of all his important guests and refuse his stepdaughter, thereby seeming to be weak, unable to carry through or deliver on a promise? Or should he risk ordering the death of this person who might indeed be a holy man? But Herod sees the political problem first and foremost. He *must* be seen to be strong and to be a man of his word. His power is at stake. And so he issues the order that causes John’s head to be delivered on a platter, unimaginably gruesome as it was, to a young girl. She waited there, in that supercharged atmosphere, for the deed to be done.

“Perplexed” is a good word not just for Herod, but for the entire story. For starters, what’s the point? Is it about letting us know what happened to John the Baptist, and why he wasn’t still around competing with Jesus for followers? Is it a moral tale about what happens when one disobeys the God of Leviticus and marries a person forbidden by the law? Is it about Herod, and what a sorry character he is in this story, so afraid of losing face that he was capable of ordering a total horror? Is it about his political power, and weak will? Because, every one of us is called to love God with all of our hearts and minds and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Herod knew this, it should have been the very center of his existence as a Jew. And yet, he was unable to be clear-headed about the sanctity of human life, and about what God required of him. And one final possibility: Is this about Herodias, devising a way to get back at her husband for asking such a terrible thing of her young and beautiful daughter?

Perhaps the story means all of those things, and more. Herod is quite a lot like Pilate, whom we will meet at the end of this gospel. Pilate too wishes to distance himself, and is unable to take a stand that will keep the death of Jesus from happening. Pilate doesn’t wish to use his power in this way, and his wife also figures in the story. Perhaps this frightening scripture is meant to prepare us for what is going to happen to Jesus at the hands of an indecisive public official, and a crowd that must be obeyed. One can only imagine Herod’s guests, his own crowd, egging him on.

But perhaps this party gone wrong is meant to set us up for a party beyond our imagining. In our story, there are excesses all around, too much wine, too much food, too much salacious entertainment. But next week we will hear about Jesus, who is barely mentioned in this story, being able, with God’s help, to take, bless, break and share five loaves and two fish. All will be fed, no one will go hungry, and twelve basketfuls of leftovers will be collected. Perhaps the contrast with the story of Herod’s birthday party is meant to prepare us for who Jesus is, for what Jesus is going to do, for what God intends for the world.

People don’t agree about what today’s story means, or why our evangelist Mark inserted it into the story of the disciples going forth into the world to take the Good News. But we know Good News when we hear it. Stay tuned. After this horrific example of the depravity of which humans are capable of, we will soon see the glories God has intended for humankind. We will soon see Jesus break bread and feed thousands with the bread of life, and sustain them with the word of God. Stay tuned, and come back next week! The story isn’t over.