

“GOD WINS IN THE END”
Preaching text: Mark 6:14-29

The Gospel texts for the past month have included some wonderful Bible stories to preach on. They are well-known and inspirational to our faith.

- Four weeks ago: The parable of the mustard seed.
- Three weeks ago: Jesus calmed the storm.
- Two weeks ago: Jesus healed a sick woman and brought a little girl back to life.
- Last week: Jesus’ went home to Nazareth.

Those are all great themes to develop.

But today that run of great preaching texts comes to an end. In case you thought you were coming to church to be inspired, comforted or assured by our Gospel reading, you can forget about that. Our gospel reading is an exceptionally gruesome one. Today we hear the story of the beheading of John the Baptist! Doesn’t that image make you feel all warm and loving inside? No, not at all. But today we hear the story of how Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist is beheaded. And we can see how even in a story like this, we can find the good news.

Here’s the background for our gospel. First of all, the name Herod was a family name. There were many Herods throughout history. At the time of Jesus’ birth, Herod the Great was king. He was the one who ordered the slaughter of the babies of Bethlehem. He felt so threatened by the report of the Wise Men that a new king had been born. Herod the Great was insanely paranoid and murdered many members of his own family, including 3 of his sons. The King Herod in our gospel for today was Herod Antipas, one of Herod the Great’s surviving sons. Like his father before him, this young King Herod had multiple deficiencies. On a visit to his brother Herod Philip, Herod Antipas seduced his brother’s wife Herodias and convinced her to run away with him. To show you how messed up this was, Herodias was not only Herod’s sister-in-law, but she was also his niece, because

her father was Herod Aristobulus. The result is this incestuous family violated many of the Jewish laws.

Enter John the Baptist. Some scholars think Herod invited John to his hilltop fortress because he heard about John's popularity and wanted to meet John in person. But when they met, John pointed out Herod's sins and called him to repent. Herod had a mixed reaction. He sensed that John was someone who was "holy," but he was also irritated that John called him on his sins. So, he had John imprisoned. Herod's wife Herodias had an even stronger reaction. She wanted John killed, but Herod would not do that.

Then comes the night of Herod's birthday party. His buddies are all there. As a special gift, Herod's stepdaughter Salome does her famous "Dance of the 7 Veils." Herod is so enamored with her that he says to Salome, *"Ask whatever you want and it's yours ... even if it's half my kingdom!"* Salome goes to her mother for advice, and Herodias says, *"Ask for John's head on a platter!"* And that is how John died.

So, what do we make of all this? Do we just say the bad guys win again? Chalk up another victory for evil? The fact is evil exists in our world. Every age has its tyrants ... and our age is no different.

Day to day from the beginning of history on down to the present moment countless millions have suffered horribly, violently and senselessly. In our nation we have huge numbers of children living in poverty, medical care not being available to countless people, and gross inequities everywhere we look.

What do we do when evil wins? What do we make of this story? If this is how the gospel ended, it would be very depressing, and we could all go home because what use is there anyway. But this is not a story about John the Baptist. This is a story about Jesus.

Mark is telling us that nothing and no one in this world, not even the rich and powerful, are beyond the reach of Jesus. Even with all the corruption and depravity in all the details of this story ... John was bringing the message that Jesus was coming into the world and people should make sure they are ready.

The message of our faith is that evil does not have the last word. If you continue in Mark's story you see that Herod does not win. Herodias does not win. Evil does not win! The good news ... the gospel today ... is that we can celebrate that God's world doesn't end with the beheading of a prophet ... it ends with the Lamb on the throne and the promise that God gave each of us at our baptism ... that no matter what you may be facing today ... God has the final word ... and God wins in the end!

AMEN.