

Christ-Haunted

Ephesians 6: 3-14; Mark 6: 14-29

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, (July 11) 2021

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Lord Acton famously said, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” What is there about power that corrupts? And why is it that the more power one has, there is less freedom to exercise that power. Power itself seems to rule.

I have all this on my mind because today’s Gospel (Mk 6:14-29) tells of a tragic event that happened early in Jesus’ ministry – the death of John the Baptist. This story sort of comes out of nowhere and it is the only story in Mark that is not about Jesus. Right before this, Mark tells us that Jesus called the twelve disciples and sent them out, two by two, to the outlying villages healing the sick and calling people to repentance. Word spreads that this Jesus and his followers are out preaching, teaching, serving and healing. King Herod hears of it too and says, “This must be John the Baptizer come back to life after I beheaded him.” Or we might put it in our language, “This John the Baptizer movement continues to grow even after I executed him.”

So, Mark gives us this background story to explain why Herod is worried about John the Baptizer not shutting up even after beheading and why Herod had killed him in the first place.

John’s was a powerful voice. From the wilderness he preached strong, fierce sermons proclaiming commitment to God and the coming judgment of God. Now

conventional wisdom both then and now would say that the voice of Herod was more powerful than the voice of John the Baptist. After all, Herod shut John's voice up. But the truth was, it wasn't even the voice of Herod who led to John's execution, it was the whim of a dancing girl and her mother. So, part of this story raises questions about who has power and what kind of power? And who is powerless in this story?

Now this particular Herod was Herod Antipas. He was one of three sons of Herod the Great. Herod the Great was the Jewish king under Roman rule during the time of Jesus' birth. The Great is the one who dealt with the Wise Men and massacred the little children of Bethlehem and who rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. After the Great's death (remember when the Great died, Joseph, Mary and the toddler Jesus could return home after living in exile in Egypt), Rome divided the kingdom into 3 parts with each part being ruled by one of Herod the Great's sons. Our Herod of today's story was Herod Antipas, who was in charge of Galilee and Perea. His brother Herod Archelaus was over Judea but did such a poor job, that Rome removed him from power and put it in the hands of a Roman governor – Pontus Pilate. And our Herod is married to the wife of his other brother, Philip (who rules further north and east). Finally, there was another Herod in the New Testament – Herod Agrippa who is in the book of Acts. Agrippa was a nephew of our Herod today.

All these Herod's can be confusing. But from the perspective of the New Testament and the early church, when you've met one Herod, you've met them all. They are all powerful rulers, and they are all killers. In the Bible, the terms Pharaoh, Caesar, and Herod are all terms of powerful rulers and they all become synonymous terms for coercive, violent, and powerful rule.

Our particular Herod this morning, Herod Antipas had an affair with his brother's wife, and John the Baptist called him to account. It took a lot of guts for a little preacher to stand up and call this adulterous, incestuous politician to account. How *much* fortitude it took we are learning here: It cost John the Baptist his head.

Mark tells us that even though John called Herod to account, Herod feared John because he believed that John was righteous and holy. And when Herod listened to John, he was perplexed or troubled, but he also kept listening. So, here's this corrupt ruler, into power and politics, who marries his brother's wife for political gain, and although he cares very little for God or Jewish religion, he still listens to and respects John the Baptizer.

I wonder what was going on with Herod? Did he still have some semblance of belief in God? To use a term from the writer Flannery O'Connor, I wonder if Herod was haunted by God.

O'Connor wrote in the early 1960's, "While the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted." One of her great characters, Hazel Motes, in the novel *Wise Blood*, is pursued relentlessly by the wild, ragged figure of Jesus moving from tree to tree in the back of his mind, motioning to him to turn around and follow him into the dark mystery.

For Herod, was God still there in the back of his mind? Did thoughts about God keep him awake at night? What if this God-talk of John's is right? What if I've been blind about God and blind about myself? And even though Herod was not an observant Jew, indeed, he was "sorry" (to use a southern term) and was probably going to hell in a handbasket, he can't seem to get away from the fact that

something of John is telling the truth. To use an old Baptist term, Herod is under conviction every time he hears John preach.

Yet, King Herod, the man who wields the power of Rome, is powerless to do what he knows is right, and save John the Baptizer. Instead, he gives in to the whims of his daughter and wife and wants to save face in front of the crowd of big-shot politicians. So, he has John beheaded and brings the head to the daughter on a platter. The most powerful man in the room is caught in forces more powerful than him.

Mark tells us this story, and tells it at this place in his Gospel, to remind all of us followers of Jesus, that it is not all tea and cookies out there in the world.

I remember several years ago when George Patterson attended Sunday School over at Christ Episcopal Church to hear the Anglican bishop of Pakistan speak. In Pakistan, Christians are at best 2 to 3% of the population and persecuted. The bishop pointed to the large cross he wears around his neck and said, “This is an invitation to kill me.”

Mark tells of the disciples going out into the world to serve and minister but he is saying, “Be ready. There are powerful and mean people out there who will hurt you, imprison you, and even kill you.”

Herod Antipas is powerful enough to simply speak and a prophet’s head is served up on a platter. That’s how the old world defines power! But in suffering and dying, John the Baptist reveals the weakness that lurks in Herod’s brand of power. Here is a king who has not only besmirched his sovereignty by having an affair with his brother’s wife, but also a king who has stooped to killing the prophet John the Baptist, on the word of a young girl who has pleased him in her

dance for him. Herod is the most powerful person in the room but is powerless when it comes to doing the right thing and saving John.

This is also example of why the early church took powerful rulers with a grain of salt. They didn't spend any time worrying over getting a good Christian Herod elected to office, because the church knew that like Herod and like Pontius Pilate at Jesus' trial, that rulers are caught in the midst of powers that are bigger than they are. Even though the rulers have power, they are enmeshed in power that constrains them or forces them to do things or not do things. Herod wants to save face in front of the banquet guests so, against his own judgment, he orders the death of John. Pilate, at the trial of Jesus, knows Jesus is innocent of the charges but still gives into the whims of the mob and the religious leaders and orders Jesus crucified. It might be publicity, or political debts owed to other powerful people, or trying to get elected, or whatever, but powerful leaders are caught in webs of power that enslaves them.

The early Christians and the writers of the New Testament knew that God worked in other ways. The teaching of the New Testament is that it is primarily through the church – small, bedraggled, overwhelmed, outnumbered, and powerless by the standards of the Herods of the world – but it is through the small and powerless church God works God's power to bring about the love and grace, the justice and peace of Christ into the world. Paul tells the Ephesians that his calling from God is “to make everyone see the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:9-10).

God works and speaks in little ways, and often in quiet and unrelenting ways.

Years ago I was at Koinonia Farm in southern Georgia, and I heard Florence Jordan, the widow of Clarence, tell of a man who knocked on their screen door one morning while she was in the kitchen and Clarence was out working on a tractor. Florence said the fellow was a member of the little Baptist church down the road, and two weeks before the church had voted to kick Clarence and Florence out of the church due to their inter-racial work. The man asked for Clarence, who came walking up.

He said to Clarence, “Clarence, I keep hearing them sing. All the time, all night, I’m awake hearing them sing.”

Clarence said, “Who do you hear singing?”

He said, “Angels. I’m hearing angels sing every night. And I can’t sleep from hearing them sing.”

Clarence said, “What are they singing?”

He said, “They’re singing, ‘Were you there when they crucified my Lord?’ And I was there, Clarence. I was there two weeks ago when we voted you and Florence out of the church. I was there and didn’t say a word and helped crucify Jesus all over again and never opened my mouth.”

He went on, “Clarence I’ve come to ask if you would forgive me? And if you would ask God to forgive me?”

Clarence said, “I forgive you. Now, I’m not going to ask God to forgive you, but I tell you what I’ll do – I’ll go with you as you ask God for forgiveness.”

And Florence Jordan said they went right out there, and she pointed at a big old oak tree near their back door, and they knelt together. And the man asked God for forgiveness and Clarence prayed right there with him.

That man was Christ-haunted. He was under conviction. God speaks to us and continues to work on us. Sometimes it’s just a haunting figure moving from tree to tree in the back of our mind and other times, we can’t sleep, we get up and walk around in the middle of the night, but however it is, God keeps working on us. The good news is that like that man in Florence Jordan’s story, in Christ Jesus we can be forgiven and set free from the powers of our sin. Furthermore, in Christ we are empowered to be free from the powers that are bigger than we are. In the power of the resurrected Jesus Christ, we can live according to another way.

There is a great irony behind this violent story of the abuses of power. Herod executed John the Baptist to shut him up. But here we are today, and the *word* goes on. This story is being told again, like it has been told for centuries. New contemporary disciples are being instructed and encouraged by this story. It’s enough to make you ask, “Who has real power? Where does true power come from, the kind of power that doesn’t end when a ruler goes out of office, but power that continues to subvert the old world and bring forth a new world?”

A concluding note: The story of John the Baptist closes, not with what Herod has done or what the executioner has enacted, but with an account of John’s disciples, the students who had followed him throughout his life. In Jewish tradition, the sons of the father were expected to give an honorable burial to their

father. John must have left no family because his disciples stepped up and provided a burial tomb for him (6:29). Can you imagine what courage that act of devotion required? It took courage to ask for the body of someone who had been publicly executed by the government. The Herod's officials did not look kindly on people who came to collect the body of an enemy of the state.

So, if you thought courage died with John the Baptist, think again. John's disciples show John's courage in their stepping up to give John the Baptist a respectful entombment. See what Mark is doing? The seemingly small detail is revelatory. The courage continues. Herod thought that he had once and for all put an end to the nuisance of this troublesome, outspoken prophet. But Herod is powerless to shut John up. The preaching continues. The gospel continues. The story continues. And the courage continues.

Right here in Austin Heights, the courage continues. Looking out on you this morning, I don't see many people that the world would regard as important, powerful people. I see a small, bedraggled, bunch overwhelmed with grief, and tired of the pandemic and the changes from the pandemic. We're worried over climate change and the extreme weather out West, and we are weighed down by the meanness, bigotry, fear, and selfishness of this world. I see you tired by always going against bigger and better financed, better organized, and richer and more powerful interests.

And yet, it is the promise of the gospel that Jesus is busy subverting the old powerful world and creating a new way through small rag-tag, Christ-haunted, Christ-centered, congregations and communities like you. Every time you speak up for love in the face of hate, every time you tell the truth about injustice and reach out and attempt to subvert injustice, every time you show mercy in the face of

bigotry, every time you embody grace, and share healing you are showing power, true power, the power of God in Jesus Christ. The grand promise that gathers us, is that nothing, and no power on earth, will be able to defeat the power of this resurrected Jesus. Our job is to stick with him.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.