

## Remembering Salome and John the Baptist

Mark 6:14-29

A Sermon for DaySpring

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Mikeal C. Parsons

It seems everybody has a crazy cousin, and Jesus, it turns out, is no different from anybody else! Jesus had John the Baptist, or “Jack the Dipper” as I imagine he was affectionately known to close friends and relatives. John was, no doubt, the subject of most of the conversations at family reunions. Strange diet of desert s’mores. Stranger clothes. Hermit’s lifestyle. Always insulting the church crowd who came out to hear him, calling them, among other things, a “Brood of vipers!” He spoke in dark metaphors of unquenchable fires and axes laid at the roots of barren fruit trees and stones crying out. The lectionary mostly shields us from that side of John the Baptist. But once every three years during the summer heat of ordinary time, the lectionary unleashes the story of John’s beheading on unsuspecting congregations around the world! To be honest, having spent most of my life in “non-liturgical” Baptist churches, I don’t recall ever hearing a sermon on this text, and I am quite sure I have never preached it, and I assure you, preaching on the beheading of John the Baptist has NEVER been on my bucket list! I will leave it to you to decide if Bro. Eric has planned his entire summer vacation around not preaching on this text (the lectionary will have the last laugh, since David and Bathsheba are right around the lectionary corner!). In any case, the lectionary lot has fallen to (or on) me! So let’s tackle this text “head on,” so to speak.

We might begin by stating clearly what the story is not about. The Beheading of John the Baptist, at least in its popular reception in art and literature, apparently has more sex and violence than most any of the other stories in the Gospels. But the story is not *about* the violence or sex. Certainly there is violence—grotesque and graphic violence, and we react to this grisly account by joking that Baptists don’t dance because the first Baptist lost his head at a dance (I think originally this wasn’t a joke but a sermon by J. Frank Norris!). Or we reduce the story to the level of fiction, with John the Baptist corresponding to a cartoonish character in the likes of the Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow or Nearly Headless Nick. Yet even the most skeptical scholars believe that the executioner’s axe was literally and gruesomely laid to the flesh-and-blood head of John the Baptist at Herod’s command. Yes, there’s violence, but the story isn’t *about* the violence.

So what about the sex? Our reading of the story is shaped by its subsequent re-tellings in our sexually obsessed Western culture in which the dancing daughter of Herodias (known as Salome since the time of Josephus) becomes the classic *femme fatale* in the artistic imagination, from the spurned Salome’s macabre kiss of John’s decapitated head in Oscar Wilde’s play to the scantily clothed Brigid Bazlen’s sensual dance in Cecille B. DeMille’s 1961 *King of Kings* film.

We may be reading more sex into the story than is actually there (Capel Anderson). Certainly, some details of the story suggest something untowardly is going on, if not by the dancing daughter then certainly by Herod and his guests. This is after all a birthday celebration, an almost exclusively pagan affair, and a stag party at that, attended only by male guests, military leaders and leading men of the area. The testosterone levels were matched only by the amount of wine consumed. But Herodias’ daughter may have only been between 9 and 11 years of age when she danced for her step-father.<sup>1</sup> So even if the dance were viewed as enticing to

Herod and his buddies, that doesn't mean that Herodias' daughter herself understood the suggestive nature of her movements.

Rather than viewing the daughter as a mature adult responsible for intentionally inciting Herod to make a rash vow and therefore as ultimately culpable for John's death, we should view her as a pawn in the struggle between Herodias and Herod, another child exploited by adults, another little girl dolled up in makeup and hairspray and costume jewelry and decked out in stiletto heels, smiling naively and unknowingly, as these voyeuristic adults make her the object and instrument of their own desires. We are closer here to Olive in *Little Miss Sunshine*, innocently dancing her inappropriate burlesque than we are to Rita Hayworth as Salome dancing the provocative Dance of the Seven Veils!

When Herod offers Salome a gift, she automatically and obediently goes to her mother for advice, and Herodias again manipulates the girl to seek revenge against John the Baptist by asking for his head. But, of course, the innocent do not remain innocent for long in these cycles of exploitation. It is the dancing daughter herself who adds to her mother's request for John's head the sickening detail that it be served "on a platter."

[Time out for a pastoral aside. (You were probably weren't aware that there's an obscure rule in homiletics that allows for one time out per 20 minute sermon, and the time isn't charged against the total time of the sermon!) From my perspective the text has raised the very sensitive issue regarding the exploitation and abuse of children. That topic may make us uncomfortable in church, but what place, really, better to address it than church? It is also a very timely issue since in the aftermath of the death of Michael Jackson, allegations that he behaved inappropriately with children have resurfaced again and again in the public media. Whether or not those allegations are true, this issue has bombarded the news waves and caused lots of dinner conversations between parents and children—I know, because we had one recently with our 11 and 12 year old sons. So I just want to acknowledge the elephant in the room, the elephant in the global living room, and I want to take a moment to say a word directly to the children in the congregation—a word in behalf of all the Salomes in the world. Parents and adults, you can listen in since this is a first and not a final word designed to prompt further table talk later today or this week. Children of DaySpring, because each of you is a wonderfully unique creation of God (as Miss JoAnne just said), adults in your life have a sacred responsibility to exercise their power over you with Love and Kindness and Fairness and Goodness. And the vast, vast majority of them do, and we trust them. But we still live in Herod's fallen world, and some time there may be an adult in your life, perhaps a stranger or someone you or your parents know or even, as in Salome's case, someone you trust or think you ought to trust, who abuses that power and authority and asks or tells you to do something you shouldn't be asked to do and may even offer you gifts. Someone may suggest or urge you to do something "for fun" that is something you are uncomfortable in doing, something you shouldn't be asked to do.

They may try to use words to make you feel very special or maybe very guilty to try to get you to go along. This person is not thinking of what is best for you, just as Herod and Herodias were not thinking of what was best for Salome. Salome didn't have anybody to stand up for her (John was in jail); she didn't have anyone to turn to when she was asked to do something by adults she shouldn't have been asked to do. But you do have someone to turn to. Please, if that ever happens to you, find an adult you know you can trust—a parent, your pastor, a teacher—and tell them what's happening. And don't be ashamed, because you've not done anything wrong. And parents and caregivers and friends of DaySpring Children and beyond, while we can't change what happened to Salome, we can pledge to be ever vigilant to keep it from happening to the children under our care and watch and to do everything in *our* power to break these cycles of exploitation in Herod's fallen world.

OK, time back in.]

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I've spent nearly half my allotted time arguing what this text is *not* about! Which still leaves unanswered the question, if the story isn't about violence or sex, what *is* it about? I've already hinted at the answer, of course. Most stories that are seemingly about sex or violence are almost always in actuality about power and its abuse. And this story is no different. This story is a tale of two kingdoms—the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. Through this story, Mark argues that if God is King, then Herod (or Caesar or anyone else) is not. There are several hints in the story confirming this. This Herod is Herod Antipas not Herod the Great. And

technically this Herod's title was "tetrarch," literally ruler of a quarter of the country (cf. Matt 14:1; Luke 3:19). The title "king" was intentionally ironic. Mark's audience no doubt knew that the Emperor Augustus had refused Herod Antipas the title "king" when his father, Herod the Great died (Josephus *Ant.* 17). Later when another of the Herods (Agrippa) received the title "king" from Caligula, Herodias was so jealous she prodded Herod to go to Rome and again request the title for himself. This request ultimately led to his dismissal and exile. "King" Herod is no "king" after all, and Mark and his audience know it.

These facts don't keep Herod from *pretending* to be a king. Herod's proverbial yet pitiful offer to Salome of  $\frac{1}{2}$  his kingdom (which was only  $\frac{1}{4}$  the size of his father's to start with), is an offer which, as a puppet of Rome, he actually does not have the power to grant. Rather it leads to the spiteful request for John's head—that fox Herod is "outfoxed" by his wife! And rather than risk the shame of weakness before his guests and despite a certain fondness for John, Herod orders the decapitation without so much as the blink of an eye. Herod saves his face but loses his soul.

John's criticism of Herod's marriage to his brother's wife is not exclusively on the grounds of violating the moral taboos against incest found in Leviticus; it is also a critique of the ancient practice of endogamy, in which wealthy families inter-marry in order to keep economic and material resources "in the family." In a world of perceived limited goods, in which the pie is only so large, when one family hordes resources it deprives others of access to them. Thus John, in behalf of the vulnerable—the widows, the orphans, the poor—is criticizing Herod's marriage to Herodias as a violation of purity laws and an abuse of economic power, which denies access to material resources to those who desperately need them. If God is King, then Herod (or Caesar or anyone else) is not.

The Baptist speaks Truth to Power, and it is here that we can find a place for ourselves in the story. John the Baptist has long held a "landmark" place in the Baptist imagination. For a long time and for most Baptists, the myth of Baptist beginnings was a "trail of blood" (J.M. Carroll) that extended from John the Baptist through Jesus and the First Baptist Church of Jerusalem and continued through various groups (many of them heretical) that were united by their suffering persecution for their faith, as John the Baptist did. Now I am not suggesting that we resurrect this "trail of blood" version of Baptist origins; many, including our own Dan Williams, have shown that it is bad historiography and bad theology. HOWEVER, we, as Baptists, have shared with John not only the name "Baptist" and the practice of "baptizing," but a prophetic understanding that God's Kingdom, unlike the kingdoms of this world, is characterized by Justice in Love and a conviction that there will be moments when God's Justice requires God's People to speak God's Truth to Power.

Sometimes that decision to speak the truth has led to suffering and persecution and, as for John, perhaps even death. This is certainly true of the early Baptists. Obadiah Holmes, who received thirty lashes across his bare back for refusing to submit to the decrees of the Massachusetts state church, was not the only historic Baptist to suffer for speaking Truth to Power. And we have Baptist brothers and sisters around the globe in Azerbaijan and Bulgaria and South Asia who know all too well the reality of the dangers of speaking Truth to Power.

But in *our* context, we are as likely to be ignored as we are to be persecuted. Truth is, we are sorely tempted to hide behind the securities of a majority faith that turns a blind eye and deaf ear to issues of justice (Weaver). We are too often seduced by Herod's Power to give voice to John's Truth. Nevertheless, we are called to join our voices with John who cries out in the wilderness, "Prepare the Way of the Lord!" Tom Wright, Bishop of Durham, has reminded us

that to be preparers of the Lord's Way means that "we are called to be kingdom-bringers in whatever sphere we can. We have to think globally and act locally, campaigning for the big issues like debt remission, and working on the local issues like housing and unemployment." Kingdom-bringers here at DaySpring seek to shape public policy to insure quality education for all children in Waco. DaySpringers work for fair trade laws and seek to break the cycle of poverty through education in sustainable farming methods in Waco and beyond. We must, as kingdom-bringers, think globally and act locally. Sometimes our efforts may seem only the drip, drip, drip, of the proverbial "drop in the bucket." But these small acts join with others to become tributaries and still others to become streams and still others and others and countless others, until finally God's justice will come "rolling down like a mighty river." The story of John the Baptist demands us to answer this question: what are you doing—what am I doing—to speak and act and live the Truth of God's Justice and Mercy before the powers of this world?

We follow John's example because John was a fore-runner to Jesus, and John's fate foreshadows Jesus' fate. As John was "handed over" and put in prison, so Jesus will be handed over later in the story. Just as John was executed by a reluctant politician, who wished to please his guests and does the expedient rather than the just thing, so Jesus will be executed by a reluctant politician seeking to satisfy the crowds by doing the expedient rather than the just thing. And not just Jesus, but his followers, will be handed over and stood before the authorities and suffer for proclaiming the coming of God's rule.

But if the violent and shameful *death* of John the Baptist foreshadows the violent and shameful *death* of Jesus (and his followers), so conversely does the *resurrection* of Jesus foreshadow the ultimate fate of John (and later disciples as well). Ironically, in this topsy-turvy story where everything is turned upside down and inside out, the end to the story is found at its beginning, on the unwitting lips of "King" Herod. Herod calls an emergency cabinet meeting to discuss the identity of Jesus. After various options are offered, Herod pronounces, "John whom I beheaded has been raised from the dead!" Herod could not *possibly* have understood what he was saying, but we can understand; yes, we can understand. We, who in Christian hope believe that Death doesn't hold the final word, know that John the Baptist *has not yet* been raised from the dead, but one day—One Great Day—he will!

So we remember John the Baptist, Jesus' crazy cousin—*our* crazy cousin—in the Hope that he—and we—will One Day be raised to walk in newness of life, and on that Great Day, the body of Christ itself, and all those, like Salome and John, whose lives were torn apart physically or emotionally in Herod's fallen kingdom, will finally be re-membered, and God's rule will finally be established once and for all. In the meantime—in the "in between" time—let us speak and live and do God's Truth. So may it be and so do we pray, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Mark 5:41, in which the same diminutive term for "little girl" (*korasion*) is also used, and Mark, in an aside, adds that she was nevertheless 12 years of age, on the threshold of adulthood. Here the assumption is that Herodias' daughter is less than 12 or Mark would have used the term for young woman, not little girl.