

Herodias and Herodias

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Reading through the gospel for this week is sort of a horrific treat. The beheading of John the Baptist is nothing if not a great story—drama, intrigue, tension, conflict, resolution. Even as a flashback (“John, whom I beheaded, has been raised!”) to explain Herod’s response to Jesus’ ministry, it’s the kind of story one doesn’t want to read and yet cannot stop reading. But compelling as it is, I don’t necessarily want to preach about a head on a platter.

So where do you look, besides the violent end to John the Baptist? Do you raise the issue of Herod sticking to his oath, regardless of the cost? Is that an admirable trait, or in this instance a spineless move? Is there a sermon to be found in the near-unquenchable wrath of Herodias the wife, who we learn would just as soon kill John herself? Or the pawn-like role of Herodias the daughter?

This is the only time we see either of the women in the larger story. While Herod’s wife has a strong influence and voice, she is offstage, waiting in the wings for her victory. Her daughter, though, is far more central. Called on to provide entertainment for such an important birthday party, she succeeds—and Herod rewards her with an offer of up to half the kingdom.

I am immediately (as Mark would write) intrigued about what impact that gift would have for a young woman of that era. What would it mean for her future? How would her life be different? But while we can imagine all we’d like, we don’t get to know: the request from her mother is for John’s head, on a platter.

We also don't get any insight to what is going through the daughter's mind. Is she disappointed? Did she want his head on a platter, too? What would have happened if she had refused her mother?

The reading ends and we're left with our questions, wondering, "Where's the good news?" We're called to look beyond this one story to know and share that God's good work in the world does not end on a platter. God's good work in the world ultimately overcomes death and dances in resurrection glory.