

A terrible text: Mark 6:14-29

by [Joanna M. Adams](#) in the [June 28, 2003](#) issue

If preachers are ever inclined to take a break from the rigors of the lectionary, it is in the middle of the summer, when the blackberries are ripe for picking and the pews are thinly populated. I have a special place in my heart for those who bravely shape and roll out a summer set of sermons based on “Terrible Texts” or “Passages I’ll Bet You Didn’t Know Were in the Bible.” By the time the fireflies have gone, the congregation and the preacher have struggled through the account of poor Uzzah’s being struck dead for reaching out his hand to steady the ark when it wobbled on its way to Jerusalem (2 Samuel), or the heartbreaking saga in Judges about Jephthah’s daughter, who lost her life because of her father’s foolish promise. These will surely make the summer hit parade.

Because the lectionary usually spares us such grim episodes, it is noteworthy that Mark’s account of the beheading of John the Baptist is an assigned Gospel lesson in the month of July. I confess that I have never heard nor preached a sermon on the passage, and for good reason. You can put your ear to the ground and listen as hard as you can, but you will not detect a single note of authentic joy or hope anywhere in the vicinity. What you will hear is a sordid tale of anger and revenge, resentment and death. Jesus is never even mentioned. Instead, the plot revolves around two men—John the Baptist and Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, and two women—Herodias, Herod’s wife, formerly married to Herod’s brother Philip, and Herod’s niece/stepdaughter, also named Herodias. (Jewish historian Josephus identified her as “Salome,” which helps with the confusion.)

John had gone to Herod and had told him that his marriage was a moral outrage. (Herod had broken up his brother’s marriage in order to take Herodias as his wife.) Herod did not like John’s words, but the blushing bride was so infuriated that she wanted to kill him. Herod, who spent most of his time trying to please people, decided to lock John the Baptist in prison.

Things came to a head, if you will pardon the expression, when Herod threw a birthday banquet for himself. The entertainment for the evening was provided by the

family lotus blossom, Salome, who danced up such a storm that Herod told her that she could have anything she wanted. When Salome asked her mother what she should ask for, Herodias shot back, "Ask for the head of John the baptizer!"

Salome returned to the party and made the demand, adding her own personal touch by requesting that John's head be served on a platter as the last course at the banquet. Herod did not really want to grant the request, but he couldn't afford to lose face in front of Salome or his VIP guests, who had heard him make his foolish promise. After the grotesque scene ended, what was left of John was claimed by his disciples and laid in a tomb.

Though Jesus is never mentioned, the key to understanding why this sorry saga shows up where it does in Mark's Gospel is its relation both to the growing fame of Jesus and the success of his disciples. On their very first missionary journey, the disciples had "cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them" (Mark 6:13). Just as in the opening verses of Mark the beginning of Jesus' ministry is linked to the work of John the Baptist, so here, John's death foreshadows Jesus' death. Just as John's willingness to speak the truth to power leads to his being taken prisoner and suffering a terrible death, so it will be with Jesus. Herod will become Pilate. The means of execution will be a cross rather than a sword, but the end will be the same. And so it will be for many of the early followers of Jesus, readers of Mark, who will be imprisoned and die for the sake of the gospel.

Those who follow Jesus in any age must never become carried away with the naïve notion that faithfulness to God will ever be easy. The road is rocky. Resistance is real, as is the fecklessness of many who are entrusted with political power and who are threatened by any authority other than their own. It is not that they are all bad or all good. It is that when things get tight, expediency and people-pleasing usually carry the day.

And, of course, there is the capacity for evil that can flourish in any human heart, regardless of outward beauty or grace. There is also the ferocity of wounded pride and the wish for revenge. These are too real.

Over the desk in my study is a small framed photograph taken in the early 1930s. My grandmother Anna, a preacher's wife who died before I was born, sits in a wicker rocker, a shawl around her ample shoulders and a Bible open in her hands on her lap. Whatever is the opposite of Herodias and Salome was my grandmother. I

wonder what she thought about the beheading of John the Baptist. I am sure she knew the story. And I think she also knew that it would take more than a decapitation to stop the truth of God, more than a crucifixion to stop the Son of God, more than persecution to stop the mission of God.

All the important guests at Herod's birthday party would never know what my grandmother knew—that after Herod was sealed in his grave, you and I would be thinking about John the Baptist and rejoicing that gospel power was still on the prowl.