
A TALE OF TWO WORLDS

If you've spent any time looking at the gospels and what makes them similar and unique, you're probably aware that Mark's Gospel is the Reader's Digest Condensed Version of the JESUS' story.

- It is the shortest gospel.
- Everything happens immediately.
- It has sometimes been said that Mark's descriptions of JESUS' ministry are "pearls on a string," meaning that there is no extraneous information, no extra details.
 - Just the facts. Just the basics, compared to Matthew and Luke who expand with their own material.

But then we come to today's reading where Mark dedicates fifteen verses to the beheading of John the Baptizer.

- Fifteen verses where JESUS is not mentioned.
- Fifteen verses that seem rather peripheral to the objectives of the Kingdom of GOD.
- Fifteen verses that seem out of place in the Marken gospel.
 - So, what is the purpose of this passage?

It would be easy just to pass over it with a simple reference to a historical event in the life of JESUS.

- Here's what happened to John the Baptizer. That's unfortunate. On with our story...

Well, for what it's worth, here's what I think:

- I think Mark by including this is offering to us an extended parable.
 - That is, Mark is throwing (*bola*) the reign of GOD that JESUS proclaims and exemplifies alongside (*para*) life in the world absent of GOD's reign and rule.
 - Note that this story falls about midway in Mark's telling of JESUS' ministry before HE enters Jerusalem for the culmination of HIS mission.
 - This seems to be a pretty good place to put this story and draw this contrast between two worlds:
 - what life is like with JESUS and within the world HE proclaims and enacts, and
 - what life is like without HIM, caught in worldly structures of power and insecurity and exploitation.

But lest this sounds overly "judgy", let me remind us that parables aren't offered to judge—they are given to contrast.

- There is no word of judgment from JESUS here.
 - Remember JESUS doesn't even appear in this story.
- There is no condemnation of Herod and his behavior unless it comes from Herod himself:
"But when Herod heard of this, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!'"

This is what parables, at their best, do:

- they don't so much as accuse as they offer a contrast that surprises you, sometimes even traps you, with a conclusion about yourself and the world that moves you to reconsider your assumptions, values, and actions.
 - Recognize that a narrative contrast is far more effective than one that simply condemns.
 - We identify with stories—parables—and they put us at ease, allowing us to explore what they mean for us and our understanding of our life and world in contrast to GOD's world and vision for us.

The framework for this parable is bound in the relationship between John the Baptizer and Herod.

- But it is important to know who Herodias is.
 - Herodias was the granddaughter of Herod the Great.
 - First, she married her uncle, Herod Philip.
 - While he was a guest in their home, Herod Antipas (the Herod of this Gospel reading) convinced Herodias to leave her husband for him.
 - Marriage to one's brother-in-law while the brother was still living was forbidden by Mosaic Law.
- John the Baptizer regularly criticized Herod and thereby Herodias for this violation of the law.
 - Herod had John arrested, but often found it entertaining to hear John speak.
 - Herodias, however, was not amused and looked for ways to end John's life.
 - That opportunity came when her daughter, Salome, danced for Herod and his guests at a dinner party,
 - and Herod, so entertained by the girl that he made a ridiculous promise to her.
- And now you know the background to the rest of the story we heard today.

So here are the two worlds that Mark presents as the contrasts in this parable of the death of John the Baptizer:

The first is the reign of GOD in JESUS has been, essentially, the focus of Mark's Gospel so far.

- It centers on JESUS' determination to free GOD's people from the forces that rob us of abundant life:
 - things like possessions, disease, discrimination, even death
- JESUS comes and, in HIS compassion for the world's needs, responds to all those who ask.
 - Indeed, and as we saw last week, the only ones whom JESUS has any difficulty releasing are those who don't want to be free because they can't imagine either that a) they need release, or b) that He is able to help.

The second is the world as it is: a life devoid of either conscience or mercy, even arresting and executing political opponents, and that falls painfully short of GOD's hopes and intentions for all GOD's people.

- Notice that even though Herod is grieved at the prospect of killing John, he never admits guilt or even reluctance.
 - Instead, he chooses to position himself on his ability to keep his promises, like the one to Salome, and his standing in front of his support base.
- The prospect of a life without conscience or guilt may initially seem appealing until we remember that without these there is no concern for justice.
 - In such a world, power is the only determining factor among courses of action and, inevitably, "might makes right."
 - Further, this is also a world devoid of mercy.
 - In a world dominated by "survival of the fittest" to feel compassion or sympathy for others is construed as weakness,
 - so, Herod beheads John to save face, rather than admit he has made a foolish promise.

Two words of caution, or at least counsel when following this line of interpretation.

First, it may be tempting to limit the scope of this story and view Herod as a contrast against which to recognize JESUS' holiness.

- But as with most of Mark's stories, this one cannot be easily confined to the pages of scripture.
- Rather, Mark offers us a description of our world—indeed, *the* world.

- Herod's beheading of John seems initially rather brutal and we are shocked to see it in the Gospel.
- But don't be too shocked: the brutality of the cross is also a reminder of our world.
- Yet are Herod's actions really all that far from the callous manipulations of power we see in our world today, where brutal autocrats are strangely praised for the sake of appearing strong and the weak are mistreated in the name of law and order?
 - This is our world and our story, and perhaps we forget that only because we have become so numbingly accustomed to seeing it play out daily in the headlines.

Second, even admitting the reality of life in this world, I'm not convinced this story calls us to overlay Herod on today's leaders (presumably the party you don't like) with the confidence and enthusiasm of the righteous (or should I say self-righteous).

- Mark's very point is that, absent the intervention of JESUS, we cannot help but fall prey to the same illusions regarding power and security that lead us to reject both justice and mercy in the belief (or actually misbelief) that the ends justify the means.

What we are therefore called to do, I believe, is to place the story of JESUS alongside the story of the world and see the truth of life without JESUS.

- The world that JESUS calls us to embrace, that is the world of GOD's reign that focuses on compassion toward and freedom for those who are most marginalized stands in stark contrast to the world with which we often find ourselves.
- Yet it need not be that way.
 - Our commitment to living like JESUS in light of GOD's promises is the way that GOD's Kingdom breaks into our world.
 - Whether it be the way we interact with those in our community or speak out for those in other places through calls or letters to representatives will open the door for the spread of GOD's reign.

All of JESUS' miracles make a huge difference in the lives of those who experience them, but none of them fundamentally change the nature or course of the world.

- It is only the compassion and mercy of JESUS, shown most clearly on the cross that does that.
 - And as those who are marked with HIS cross and called to hope through HIS resurrection, we can face the challenges of our day with equal measures of courage and confidence.
- Don't imagine that we will be fully "successful" in bringing about the reign of GOD.
 - But we will make a significant and beneficial difference for those around us even as we await the fullness of GOD's Kingdom.

Once upon a time, there was an old man who would go down to the ocean to do his writing.

- Early one morning, he was walking along the shore after a big storm had passed and noted that the beach was littered with starfish as far as the eye could see.

Soon he came upon a small boy picking up starfish and throwing them into the ocean.

- The old man said to him, "There must be ten thousand starfish on this beach. I'm afraid the sun will soon be high and dry most of them out before you make much of a difference."
 - The boy bent down, picked up yet another starfish, and threw it as far as he could.
 - Then he smiled and said, "Maybe so, but it made a difference to that one!"

We can make a difference when we choose the world in which we want to live and that we want to work for.

- Do you want the world of Herod and Herodias?
- Or do you want the world of JESUS and the Kingdom of GOD?
 - When you choose, and I'm assuming I know your choice, go out, pick up a starfish, and throw it as far as you can.