

“Where is the Good News?”
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Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg, VA
Proper 10 – July 11, 2021
Mark 6:14-29

One of the questions preachers ask themselves when wrestling with the scripture during sermon prep is, “Where is the good news?”

Sometimes it’s easy to answer that question. We hear stories of Jesus feeding people, healing people, and raising people from the dead. We hear about God’s love, about redemption, and about new life. We hear about Jesus’ compassion and miracles and the laying down of his life for his friends. Best of all, we hear about his resurrection.

And then sometimes you have a reading like today. We hear the Gospel and wonder how it could have been included in the lectionary. I doubt that any of us jumped out of bed this morning and raced to church [or to the livestream channel] because we were so eager to hear about the beheading of John the Baptist.

It’s more like a story we would see on the news than hear in church. Can you imagine if cable TV existed in 1st century Palestine? What a field day they would have with this story, blaming Herod, blaming Herodias, blaming her daughter. There would be at least one channel that would blame John and suggest he should have kept his mouth shut about who Herod chose to marry.

It’s no wonder paintings, plays, and even operas have been created about this soap opera-like story.

It doesn't provide the comfort and inspiration we often seek in church. It seems to be very bad news. The good guy doesn't get to live. Truth doesn't win. Doing the right thing doesn't guarantee that things will turn out well.

So where is the good news? Do we just ignore this text of terror and look at one of the other readings – perhaps David dancing with joy that the ark of the Lord has been returned safely to the people of Israel after it had been stolen away? That's a great story of celebration. Or do we keep wrestling until we find the blessing?

That's a rhetorical question. We're going to wrestle some more.

This is the sort of passage that makes us ask why bad things happen to good people. John is the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. He is born to be the messenger, the baptizer, voice in the wilderness preparing the way of Jesus. He isn't afraid to proclaim the truth and to call everyone to repent and return to God, even those with power over him. Instead of being rewarded, he's imprisoned. Instead of dying in an honorable way, he ends up with his head on a platter because Herod liked the way his daughter danced. It's all so very unfair.

Unfortunately, the *good* news of the Gospel is not always *happy* news. Good news doesn't mean that every little thing's gonna be all right. Neither the world nor the Bible work that way.

Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me." John the Baptist took up his cross by speaking the truth. It cost him his life. As unfair as it may seem, John's death came because he stayed true to who he was called to be.

He was willing to endure the consequences of speaking truth. That, my friends, is good news even if it's hard news and we don't really want to hear it. John the Baptist gave us the good news of repentance and receiving forgiveness of sin. He also showed us how a life lived close to God and true to our calling infuses us with courage even if we should land in the dungeons of the authorities or face death.

More than wondering why this terrible thing happened to John, though, I have another question. A question that scares me when I ask it of myself. Why didn't Herod do the right thing?

In the text we hear that he liked listening to John, that he protected John because he thought he was holy and righteous. Herod could have chosen to amend his ways, to use his power for good. He could have protected John, not by imprisoning him, but by allowing him to go on preaching and baptizing. He could have swallowed his pride, risked losing face with his officers and the guests at the feast, and refused to grant Herodias' vengeful demand. But he didn't. What's frightening about that is that it wasn't just one choice – he had made a series of choices that led to defying Jewish law by divorcing his first wife and stealing his brother's wife. Seeking more and more power and status. Taking what wasn't his. Each choice led him down a path that was ever more destructive. Who might Herod have been if he hadn't kept wanting more? What might Herod have done if he had listened to John or had spent time in prayer listening for God?

None of us is born a bad or evil person. Our genetics help to form us, sure. Our environment is a huge contributor to how our minds, bodies, and souls develop. Lots of things happen to us that are beyond our control.

And, each day we are faced with multiple choices. We get to *choose* how we're going to respond to what happens to us. One choice leads to another and another. We get to choose whether we speak truth or tell lies. What might start as a little fudge can quickly become a readiness to replace truth with falsehood even to the point that we believe our own lies.

We get to choose whether we help to hurt or whether we help to heal.

We get to choose whether we hold grudges and resentments or forgive and let go.

We get to choose whether we will welcome or whether we will exclude.

We get to choose whether we will repent and return to the Lord or whether we will get lost sliding down the slippery slope of poor choices until we no longer recognize ourselves as the beloved children of God we were created to be.

We get to choose whether we will be true to ourselves, like John, or whether we will destroy the good in our lives, like Herod.

The good news is that we get to choose. The bad news is that we get to choose.

No matter how much we try, even the best of us make choices that don't align with our values, choices we regret, choices that hurt people. But, each morning we get to start anew. Just as God's mercies are new every morning, so is our opportunity to make different choices.

Choosing the way of Jesus, the way of truth that leads to life, the way of love may not lead to living happily ever after. Choosing the way of love will lead to a life lived in humble service, in compassion for others, and the joy of living in alignment with God's will for our lives no matter what the outcome.

It's never too late to choose to become the people God created us to be. It's never too late to choose to live close to God. My friends, that is some very good news!