

# THE WITNESS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Sermon preached by The Rev. Ralph W. Bayfield, D.Min. July 11, 2021 at  
Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia

Today's Gospel is the graphic account of the horrible death of John the Baptist in Matthew and Luke's Gospels.<sup>1</sup> John had been arrested as Jesus began his ministry.<sup>2</sup> This story is the only passage of such length in the Gospels not focused on Jesus.

Jesus turns to the crowds who have been watching and speaks about John the Baptist. Jesus asks them, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see?....A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare the way before you.' I tell you, among those born of women, no one is greater than John."<sup>3</sup> That's the kind of man, Jesus described John the Baptist, the hero of today's Gospel reading to be.

Lamar Williamson, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at Union Seminary, and a neighbor of ours when we lived in Ginter Park, in Richmond has written a most informative *Commentary the Gospel of Mark* which I am using for this sermon.<sup>4</sup> Lamar Williamson points out Mark's account of John the Baptist's death, with its flashback to a birthday feast in Herod's palace, has all the mark's of a good story. There is anecdotal

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 14:1-12, Luke 9:9

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:14

<sup>3</sup> The Holy Bible NRSV, *Matthew 11:7-11 and Luke 7:18-30* :  
Thomas Nelson Publisher, Nashville, TN, 1989 pages 11 and 66

<sup>4</sup> Williamson, Jr., Lamar, *Interpretation, Mark*; John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1973

conversational style with vivid and dramatic details, an adulterous king, a scheming woman, a dancing girl, and a violent death.<sup>5</sup> I feel this Biblical narrative could make a good movie or modern day television show.

Williamson states, “No wonder its historicity is suspect. There is the generative power of legend, when the dancing girl, misnamed Herodias<sup>6</sup> in the Gospel accounts, is identified as Salome by Flavius Josephus, the first-century Jewish official Roman historian who recorded this event in his *Antiquities*. Her performance in Mark later elaborated into a dance of seven veils and the theme repeated with endless variations. These include an opera by Richard Strauss and a Hollywood Western film tied loosely to the frontier town of Salome, Arizona.<sup>7</sup> Here is sensationalism!

As word of Jesus’ works had become more widely known, people were speculating that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead, or perhaps Elijah or another prophet.<sup>8</sup> It was believed that the spirits of those who had died a violent death worked through the living. Even Herod himself wondered if Jesus might be John the Baptist raised from the dead.<sup>9</sup> This statement can be taken as a fact, because Herod indeed believed that John had been raised- or the remark can be taken as an expression of exasperation. Herod had thought that beheading John would end his problems with wonder-working prophets who stirred up unrest.

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* Williamson Jr. pages 122-124

<sup>6</sup> Mark 6:22

<sup>7</sup> *opp.cit.* Williamson, Jr. page 122

<sup>8</sup> Mark 1:15

<sup>9</sup> Mark 1:16

Mark goes on to tell of the death of John. John had been arrested and put into prison by Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and tetrarch of Galilee. In the Gospel of Luke, Herod Antipas also played a role in the execution of Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

Under Herod's orders, John had been arrested and put into prison. Herod's wife, Herodias, wanted revenge against John because the Baptist had called into question the legitimacy of her marriage to Herod. According to Mosaic Law, a man is forbidden to marry the wife of his brother while the brother is still living.<sup>11</sup>

However, the real motive behind John's arrest was likely political. John's growing popularity posed a potential threat to Herod's control over the area. Mark tells us that Herod was afraid of John and protected him, "knowing that he was a righteous and holy man."<sup>12</sup> Herod was perplexed by John and liked to listen to him.

The occasion for John's death was a banquet given in honor of Herod's birthday. Herod is a powerful man and a complicated character. Herod is confused. Herod seems to have enough self-awareness and courage to hear himself criticized, but not enough to change. In an impulsive moment he makes an oath that gives away his power. During the festivities his daughter had greatly pleased the guests with her dancing. Afterward, Herod asked her what she would like as a reward. He even offered her half of his kingdom. However, when she went to her mother to ask what to request, Herodias, her mother instructed her: "Ask for the head of John the Baptist."

The text tells us that Herod was "deeply grieved"<sup>13</sup> but cannot question the obligation to keep the oath, no matter how foolishly he made it.

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<sup>10</sup> Luke 23:6-16

<sup>11</sup> Leviticus 18:16, 20

<sup>12</sup> Mark 6:20

<sup>13</sup> Mark 6:26

Herod could not break his oath to his daughter, Salome gave John's head to her mother. Afterward, the disciples took John's body, and laid it in a tomb.

Although this grisly story seems like an interruption in the narrative, it fulfills a definite purpose in the overall narrative of Mark's Gospel. Whereas Luke connects Jesus and John through parallels of their birth stories,<sup>14</sup> Mark connects them by circumstances of their deaths, with this event foreshadowing the crucifixion.

Just as John was killed by the reigning political powers, so too was Jesus handed over and killed. Both their executioners- Herod of John and Pilate in the case of Jesus- seemed reluctant to deliver death sentences. However, both men ultimately succumbed to outside pressure from crowds of people. After their deaths, both John's and Jesus followers prepared them for proper burial as a sign of respect.

There is a final parallel that connects this story to the departure and return of the Twelve. Mark was writing at a time when being a disciple could very well mean giving up one's life. Thus the disciples had to face the fact that one day they too might be handed over to those who "Lord it over" others.<sup>15</sup>

Herod will save face, but he cannot save a life. How many times have we made such choices? How many times have we refused to use our power for good because we feared losing it? How many times have we chosen to do what is expected rather than what is right? How do we kill the voice of the prophet within us, and how do we silence those around us if and when they call us to repentance.

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<sup>14</sup> Luke 1-2

<sup>15</sup> Mark 10;42

The Gospel of John relates that Jesus regarded John as “a burning light and the people were willing to rejoice for a while in its prophetic light.”<sup>16</sup>

Some churches have seen the prophetic light. There is a little church on the top of a mountain that is always open. Homeless people wander in and sleep on its bench pews. A pile of blankets is kept near the front door, and a few parishioners take turns cleaning them. Downstairs in the undercroft, the kitchen is stocked with food, and there are chairs at the table, where the people can gather and eat a meal together. At another large suburban church, there was a Rector, who one cold winter night told his Vestry and clergy staff. Its cold outdoors, there are homeless, and we have a heated building, what must the Lord be thinking about us? The Rector and Vestry heard the Lord telling them to open their doors to the homeless.

What is the meaning of John?

The Russian mystic Valentin Tomberg, has said that “John the Baptist is the one who - in the history of the world - accomplished the act of transition from penitence to communion: it is he who led by the hand the first penitent from the ancient world to the altar of grace of the new world” - to Jesus and salvation. A forerunner indeed. *Amen!*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> John 5:35

<sup>17</sup> Opp.Cit. *Synthesis* page 4

