

Mark 6: 14-29 "Between A Rock and a Hard Place" Rev. Janet Chapman 7/15/2018

We will call her Sarah, and she was a member of my former congregation along with her husband and 3 girls. She had migrated from Romania, having met her husband while he was in the service there, and at first appeared shy and reserved. Until we got well acquainted, and then she freely shared her uncomfortableness with my being a woman pastor. Such things were simply not done where she came from. However, she tolerated me until the day she got introduced to some extreme propaganda put out by a Pro-Life lobbyist, and then it was all hands on deck for our church leadership and myself. She couldn't stop watching videos and pictures online of abortions gone awry, of fetuses being ripped apart in procedures, and of body parts lying about in abortion clinics – never mind that none of these were in the United States and those that were, had clearly been doctored by professional hackers in order to present a false and horrific impression. She came at me with harsh accusations as to why I wasn't speaking more about these horrors, why I wasn't posting the photos all over the sanctuary, and why we insisted on dialogue rather than all out condemnation. The Board voted to have both Pro-Life and Planned Parenthood representatives come to a luncheon where material could be shared by both organizations, but Sarah would have none of it – how could we even allow such baby killers in our doors to spread their evil? We felt like we were between a rock and a hard place because if we didn't do as she asked, then we were supporting abortion but if we relented to her demands, we were supporting myths and condemning a woman's right to choose. The offer to provide information and allow each person to make up their own mind was not an option for Sarah, so she left the church. Her husband continued to come and eventually they divorced. It was a sad situation for all involved.

As I look back on the drama, and believe me, that is exactly what it was, I can't help but empathize a bit with Herod, in this story of the best known birthday party ever. Maybe we should call it a b-day party, so we can also recognize the be-heading that occurred (sorry, couldn't resist). One need not be Herod to understand what Herod is going through as his birthday festivities take an unexpected turn. We face personal and spiritual dilemmas which must be carefully negotiated all the time. An overworked mother of a toddler questions how best to love and parent her child in the face of a defiant "NO" and a full-fledged temper tantrum in aisle 6 of the grocery store at the end of a very long day. A father of three struggles to explain the importance of rearranging work trip plans so he can attend a Little League playoff game. A corporate executive wonders how her announcement of a long-awaited pregnancy will affect her employees' perceptions of her as an effective boss. A stay-at-home dad wrestles with the whispers of former colleagues that he just couldn't handle the pressures of work. Teenagers experience the angst of competing for acceptance in desirable social cliques versus hanging out with the local misfit. Children of divorce try to keep the peace and struggle with how to relate to battling adults so one is not jealous or resentful of the other. Herod-like dilemmas rise up at any age as we question who we are and how we should act when life pushes and pulls us in conflicting directions.

Herod's story as told in Mark is grisly, grim and gross and ironically placed right in the middle of the stories of Jesus' growing popularity and the success of his disciples. Everything seems to be going great for Jesus and his disciples, just like it had for John and his disciples who admittedly were more famous than Jesus at the time. Within this context, Mark gives us a triangle of relationships that are deep in drama and conflict. First there is the birthday boy,

Herod Antipas who is the son of Herod the Great, the one who tried to have baby Jesus killed 30 years earlier; then there is his wife, Herodias, who also happened to be married to Herod's brother at the same time, and finally there is John the Baptist. John dared to stand up to Herod saying that his marriage was a moral outrage. He is the only one in the crowd willing to stand up and name the elephant in the room, proclaim, "The Emperor is naked," speak truth to power. It is a risky venture and different from the kind of "live and let live" attitude the Jews had taken towards this Jewish ruler. Sure they weren't happy with his sexual misconduct, his casinos and golf courses, inappropriate language and foreign policies, but all in all, they had found their dream leader who would protect their self-interests. Herodias, the blushing bride, is furious at the truth teller and wanted to kill John on the spot. But Herod wanted to keep his popularity with John's followers and the Jews so he had John imprisoned instead. The details of the story show that our author is, if nothing else, a realist. Mark is writing, after all, in the wake of the devastation caused by the Romans exercising their brutal power against the Jews by destroying the Jerusalem Temple. This is the world as Mark knows it, the world he lives in and, by extension, the world we live in as well. It reminds me of a quote that could have easily been said today, but in fact was many years ago, where the Washington Post quoted a lobbyist saying, "There are only 2 engines that drive Washington D.C. – one is greed and the other is fear." What happens in our story today is not unlike what we see played out wherever leadership has taken its power and misused it, usurping mercy, demanding drama, manipulating and conniving out of greed, fear or both.

So the drama continues as Herodias' daughter does a dance for Governor Herod and Herod is so pleased he promises the daughter whatever she wants. The girl could have a new

chariot, gold-plated if she desired; she could have the best horse in the region or a magical trip to Rome or Athens, but what should she choose? She consults her mother and one wanders what strings are pulled, as things come to a head (I'm on a roll now) and the daughter asks for the decapitated head of John the Baptist on a platter. When Truth speaks against power, the best solution is to cut off the head at the source. Herod has to make a tough decision – lose honor and authority in front of his VIP guests because of his promise, or listen to his gut that says this is not right, this is against God and he is, after all, a leader who proclaims he believes in God. The story reminds us that the consequences of bad-faith decisions are generally devastating for those with the least power in the politics of decision making. Whether it is the poor, the uninsured, the unemployed, the mentally ill, or the immigrant, the wielding of destructive power is the most debilitating to the weakest and most fragile among us. We know Herod is making the wrong decision because we read it in light of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. As Dr. Karen-Marie Yust, a good friend and seminary colleague of mine states, the challenge for us is to read our own decisions, our own Herod-like dilemmas, in light of this same story and ask ourselves whether the choices we make are self-protective, based on our own self-interests or desires to please others, or are they part of God's transformation of the world?

Flash forward to another Truth Teller who carries on John's legacy and takes it home. He too faces a leader who is amazed by his wisdom but unable to back down after being publicly outmaneuvered and swept up in events that spin out of control. This Truth Teller is passive in his final hours and executed by hideous capital punishment, dying to placate those he has offended and rising from the dead to empower others to do what he was doing before death. History tells us that when repentance is preached to this world's princes, they don't

willingly relinquish their power, however conflicted they may be. That doesn't mean, however, we stop speaking truth to power. It doesn't mean we give up dialoguing, working and straining with everything we have, when we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place, to make the right decisions, to live in righteous mercy, to do what Jesus was doing before his death. With such a foundation, God can and will work through us to save the world. Thanks be to God.