

July 5 2020 – “The Better Claim”

Mark 6:14-29

Now King Herod heard about all this, because Jesus' reputation had spread everywhere. Some people were saying, “John the Baptist has come back to life! That is why he has this power to perform miracles.”

Others, however, said, “He is Elijah.”

Others said, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.”

When Herod heard it, he said, “He is John the Baptist! I had his head cut off, but he has come back to life!” Herod himself had ordered John's arrest, and he had him tied up and put in prison. Herod did this because of Herodias, whom he had married, even though she was the wife of his brother Philip. John the Baptist kept telling Herod, “It isn't right for you to marry your brother's wife!”

So Herodias held a grudge against John and wanted to kill him, but she could not because of Herod. Herod was afraid of John because he knew that John was a good and holy man, and so he kept him safe. He liked to listen to him, even though he became greatly disturbed every time he heard him.

Finally Herodias got her chance. It was on Herod's birthday, when he gave a feast for all the top government officials, the military chiefs, and the leading citizens of Galilee. The daughter of Herodias came in and danced, and pleased Herod and his guests. So the king said to the girl, “What would you like to have? I will give you

anything you want.” With many vows he said to her, “I swear that I will give you anything you ask for, even as much as half my kingdom!”

So the girl went out and asked her mother, “What shall I ask for?”

“The head of John the Baptist,” she answered.

The girl hurried back at once to the king and demanded, “I want you to give me here and now the head of John the Baptist on a plate!”

This made the king very sad, but he could not refuse her because of the vows he had made in front of all his guests. So he sent off a guard at once with orders to bring John's head. The guard left, went to the prison, and cut John's head off; then he brought it on a plate and gave it to the girl, who gave it to her mother. When John's disciples heard about this, they came and got his body, and buried it.

Message: “The Better Claim”

In the realm of fame and popularity, we don't often think of poets as being celebrities. But there's one I suspect some of you may recognize, with his incredibly popular and well-known American poem which begins: two roads diverged in a yellow wood. Robert Frost's poem is known the world over, instantly recognizable. It describes a moment in a traveler's journey, standing at a fork in his road. Left or right? The poet muses for a time, and then concludes: Two roads

diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference. When we encounter this poem – printed on mugs, quoted on Facebook, used as a voice-over for car commercials...it's used to celebrate individualism, choosing your own path, writing your unique life story for the whole world to read. You can see why its popularity has endured, over 100 years after it was written. That moment of choice is something we've each encountered. It needn't be as epic as a poem, but we all make decisions like this one, many times over the course of our lives. Today's Scripture reading is very much about making choices.

We all know that Mark's Gospel is the Reader's Digest Condensed Version of Jesus' story. It's the shortest, the most fast-paced, with no extra details or unnecessary information. So, it should give us pause when Mark dedicates fifteen verses to the beheading of John the Baptist. Fifteen verses where Jesus is not mentioned. Fifteen verses that seem to have nothing to do with the Kingdom of God and the Gospel. It's a fascinating glimpse into what Jesus' ministry might have looked like from an outsider's perspective. Jesus, along with his disciples, has been travelling from village to village healing, anointing with oil, casting out demons and proclaiming the good news. King Herod – son of the Herod from the Christmas story - has noted this activity, and he's also heard rumours about who Jesus is: that he's Elijah or someone like the prophets of the old days, or that he's John the Baptist reborn. That strikes a chord in Herod, since it was he who had John beheaded some time ago. And so Mark writes this little snippet of a drama as a flashback to John's death at Herod's hands. It would be very easy to pass over this incident as simply a historical marker in the life of Jesus. This is what

happened to his cousin, John the Baptist. It's unfortunate, and a tragedy. Maybe it helps amp up the tension surrounding Jesus' own ministry, makes it clear that there's a lot at stake. But fast-paced Mark does not include information that isn't essential to our understanding of who Jesus is and what the kingdom of God means, so there must be more to it than that.

Mark tells of a triangle of a relationship: Herod, his wife Herodias, and John the Baptist, whose arrest was the last we heard of him (Mark 1:14). In defiance of God's Law – and in a move more worthy of a soap opera than Scripture – Herod married his sister-in-law. John called them on it. Believing John righteous and holy, Herod admired his accuser; he was sometimes confused by what John had to say, but he liked to listen to him speak. Herodias, though, nursed her grudge against him, and wanted John dead. Herod compromised and arrested John, putting him in a kind of protective custody. His wife's opportunity for revenge came at a state dinner, at which her young daughter “danced and pleased Herod and his guests.” The foolish king promised her whatever she asked, and after consulting her mother, the girl sprang the trap: “I want John's head on a platter -- right now.” And Herod was caught.

Consider the personal and spiritual dilemmas in which Herod finds himself in this passage. He is trying to balance his family relationships, his role and power as king, and his own fascination with John's words. He can't please everyone around him, and himself too. He is at odds with his wife over John and with John over his wife. His relationship with John is really even more complex: fascination, fear, a

desire to imprison, but also to protect. He is also eager to appear the powerful, competent, generous leader in front of the party guests, all of whom are important, powerful people themselves. And then his daughter, aided and abetted by his wife, boxes him into a corner. He can't go back on his promise to the girl without losing honour and prestige, yet at the same time he is also seeking some measure of truth to guide his life, something to feed that spiritual hunger, and he thinks John's truth might be what he needs. And so, Herod is caught.

Underneath all the drama – love and hate, life and death, Herodius' revenge and John's head on a platter – underneath all that, and driving everything that happens in this story, is a choice between seeking personal power and control, or life of spiritual growth and faith. The great struggle is between John the Baptist and Herod the king, but it's not the usual struggle between good and evil; Herod is not a straight forward villain by any means. There is something in him that recognises truth when he hears it; the truth in John's witness of the good news, of following God's laws not because they're the rules, but because they will fundamentally build you and your life into something new and holy and good. The pull towards pride, self-interest and lust for personal power are strong, but there is in Herod a small spark, a memory of good, that shows itself in his fascination with John's words. Like the apostle Paul, struggling to explain what sin feels like, Herod might also say: "Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me,

waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am!”

Our own lives also present a series of Herod-like personal and spiritual dilemmas. For exhausted parents and grandparents, it’s how best to love a toddler who’s having a full-fledged temper tantrum in Walmart; for someone newly retired, it’s how to fill their day while trying to figure out who they are now that their career is over. For someone who loves to get involved in the community, it’s how to choose where to invest their energy; for someone who has a generous heart, it’s deciding how much and what to give, and to whom. A stay-at-home parent copes with the lack of respect that comes with not having a “real job”; a working parent, with trying to explain that they really do need to be there for their child’s school play. Young adults experience the stress of trying to start their lives in an uncertain economy; teens, familial tensions over responsibilities and freedom. Each situation, each dilemma, is a moment where we make a choice. How do we respond?

Throughout our lives, we question who we are and how we should act as life pushes and pulls us in conflicting directions. How do we decide? Against what measure do we assess our response to all these dilemmas? As in Herod’s story, there are lives at stake as we decide how to respond and what takes priority.

The most obvious life at risk in this story is John's, of course, but Herod is also at risk. The survival of his spiritual self, that small part of him that heard the truth, that heard the good news and was fascinated by it, is threatened by his decision to choose his public image, political power, and personal pride over further conversation with John. Perhaps it was his guilt over putting John to death that led him to believe that Jesus is John resurrected. Perhaps Herod imagines that he'll get a second chance to listen to John's message of repentance and hope, and that he'll finally be able to grasp onto it for himself and have that new and holy and good life John proclaimed.

Herod knew enough of the truth to recognise his own falseness. The meeting between these two men could have been transformative for Herod, but Herod's love of power and his need to be seen to be powerful and kingly led him to make the politically astute decision, rather than choosing faith. And so John died. Speaking truth to power – John's role in this particular story and really, his whole ministry – has always been dangerous. But failing to hear the truth because we get caught up in believing that enough control and power will get us the comfortable life we want; that fulfillment comes from the power we exert over others and not from faith, that the world's claim upon us is the better one, well, that would be infinitely more dangerous.

We started today by talking poetry: Frost's *The Road Not Taken*. After the stirring first verse and before the triumphant conclusion, there is a middle bit that kind of changes our perspective. In the less famous middle part, the poet describes the

two roads. One bends down and away into the undergrowth; the other, just as walkable and perhaps having the better claim; was it a little less worn down? Maybe, but “as for that the passing there had worn them really about the same.”

Poems are art, not science, and so they’re always open to interpretation...but it seems the road the poet took, his “road less travelled” was really not less travelled at all. “I shall be telling this with a sigh,” he says, “somewhere ages and ages hence.” Is this whole “road less travelled” just a story the poet planned to tell others, years down that road, to flatter himself? Justify his choices when questioned, at the end of his life? Perhaps this poem isn’t a salute to courageous individualism at all, and instead lures us into admitting the self-deception we practice when constructing the story of our own lives. No doubt Herod would tell us that circumstances required him to do what he did. I made the hard decisions, and I took the big risks. It was John’s head or my own power, my position, the sway I needed to be king. I needed to be king.

There may be moments or long stretches of years where we are more Herod than John. Long stretches or moments where we wrestle with the choice between seeking personal power or an easy, predictable life, or instead embark on a life of spiritual growth and faith. Long stretches where we choose to walk the path that appeals to our vanity, our pride; decisions of the moment, that allow us to stay exactly as we are, untroubled and unchallenged. But the other road is always there; we can choose the path that will irrevocably transform us, make us more and more like Jesus, as we journey toward God.

We are none of us, I'm guessing, kings or queens of Judah; but the decisions we make; the values we live by; the community organisations we join and support; what we do with our time and money; how we treat those who are weaker than us; how we respond to those in need; if we're moved by tragedy or find ourselves indifferent to it; all of these are small choices we make that move us further down one road or the other. It's an awareness that every choice, every action, every word matters that allows us to lead ever-truer Christian lives in the world. And as appealing as it might be to imagine that we are all individuals, blazing our path across history...Jesus instead calls us to follow him, and that's a much better claim on our lives, a better road to travel, than any other.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.