

Mark 6:14-29

14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead, and for this reason, these powers are at work in him." 15 But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

17 For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. 18 For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. 21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 22 When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." 23 And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." 24 She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." 25 Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." 26 The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27 Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, 28 brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. 29 When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Let's put the story in context; it has been a whirlwind time for Jesus. He visited his hometown and was not welcomed. So, he leaves for the surrounding area to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel, to heal and cast out demons. He sends his disciples

out two by two to expand his work. They return after a successful mission trip that came to Herod Antipas's attention.

And that's where our story begins. Herod Antipas hears about Jesus but can't figure out who he is; he thinks John the Baptizer raised from the dead. Others say, "It is Elijah." And others say, "It is a prophet like one of the prophets of old."

Just as an aside, these responses foreshadow what the disciples say about Jesus when he asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" and "Who do you say that I am?" later in the Gospel story. The disciples answer in the same way.

But Herod Antipas fears it is John the Baptist, who he had unjustly and recklessly beheaded, has been resurrected by God. He links Jesus to John the Baptist as they are throughout scripture. Remember, John the Baptist's death signaled to Jesus it was time to begin his ministry.

Mark puts the story here right after the disciples returned from a wildly successful tour of the area and were full of themselves. Maybe this is a cautionary warning to all who follow Jesus. There is more to it than prosperity and success. There is also mission and self-giving love for the sake of God's kingdom coming and being actualized on earth. And following your call can be risky.

It is not surprising that Herod Antipas killed John. He was his Father's son. Herod the Great tried to be rid of Jesus when he was born by slaughtering children to eliminate Jesus, whose family had already fled to Egypt. This is the downside to the traditional Christmas story.

Herod the Great was a bloody, ruthless leader supported by the Romans and often had his opponents, even his family members, killed for the sake of his position. And like father-like son, they both thought they were above the law; indeed, the law was what they wanted it to be. They failed to see God's rule extended over all areas of life, not just where they liked it, and doing God's justice was their charge from God; they were to maintain it for all people, not just themselves.

Their primary allegiance was themselves first and Rome second. God and God's people were, at best, a distant third.

So why did Herod Antipas kill John? John called him to account because of his marriage to his living brother's wife, which was a violation of fundamental Jewish law. John, a prophet and the forerunner of Jesus who baptized Jesus, called Herod to account; John messed in politics. He did what prophets must do to speak the truth to power.

This was no way to get ahead; instead, it cost him his head, and this is a tragedy. And this is even more tragic because Herod Antipas liked to listen to the eccentric prophet, John. He knew there was something to him—he was a holy man of God. If only John hadn't mixed faith and politics.

There is the fascinating tale of how Herodias, Herod Antipas' wife, manipulated all this at a drunken birthday party banquet that Antipas held for himself. A party, one of the worst parties ever recorded, that turned into an absolute disaster with the murder of John.

This contrasts with the feeding of the 5000, which comes right after this scene, symbolically a party for all people, not just the right and the powerful. It is a preview of God's banquet for all people.

Maybe that is part of the purpose of this passage, to warn people about what happens when you mix faith and politics.

Antipas had John beheaded, one of the worst acts recorded in the gospels. He knew he was wrong, but he had to maintain appearances. His conscience said this was wrong, yet for power and prestige and to save face, he had John executed.

This foreshadows Jesus, God's son, standing before another Roman-appointed politician, Pontus Pilate, who saw Jesus as innocent yet sent him to his death.

The contrast here is between a Godly shepherd who is unafraid versus the image of Pilate and Herod, who always give in to expedience.

Jesus and John foreshadow what can happen when religious folks get involved in politics; it can be dangerous. When the people of God challenge the way things are, it can be hazardous.

It was for Doctor King. Remember: On March 7, 1965, white law-enforcement officer violently dispersed protesters, the vast majority of whom were African-American, as they crossed the Edmund Pettus bridge during the first attempt to initiate the Selma to Montgomery march.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Edmund-Pettus-Bridge>

That event foreshadows his tragic martyrdom in Memphis.

I don't think that is the case for us. Following God's call does not lead to our deaths although it may entail the sacrifice of our comfort for the good of the world, but that is worth it.

When we say "yes" to God through our faith in Jesus, we realize there is a cost, and that cost is discipleship. It is when we let love, generosity, hope, and faith govern our actions. When we welcome people, share, trust, and care for others, it can push us into the messy world of politics. These are some of the marks of discipleship. We are to choose these, rather than fear, selfishness, and despair as the path to walk for a faithful life. This caring takes place in the messy everyday world, which is the world of politics. It is simply impossible for the faithful to avoid mixing faith and politics. I remember when I interviewed with the Session of this church almost 12 years ago, the issue of preaching politics came up. I think Gary Gruver raised it, and I said what I hope I have honored since then. Preaching about politics cannot be escaped; politics is how society organizes itself, and the church must speak to that. But I will not be partisan from the pulpit, for that is unfair since you don't have a chance to talk back, and many of you would want to.

But I will gladly discuss my views with you when you can talk back, and we can speak and listen though I imagine most of you know them.

I do not believe any political party or group encompasses the love of Jesus for the world and all its people. It is always us vs them.

When I describe our church to others, I call us a purple church, a mixture of red and blue bound together by our love for Jesus and each other. It is a love that surpasses our political allegiance, and that is as it should be.

However, I do have basic political concerns. I have spoken against personal and systemic discrimination and prejudice, be it based on race, sexual orientation or identity, ability, mental or emotional issues, ethnicity, or religion, and speak for a world where all of God's people enjoy the benefits God intends for all people. Even there, I do not always have it right. And I am still learning how much more I have to learn.

Our faith has something to say about how we should live as individuals and as a society. Our faith must speak bravely, forcefully, and humbly to politics. Even when I speak against social ills, I know I am one who practiced and benefited from this injustice.

Even though I am a first-generation American and a member of a minority, Jewish, and never enslaved people, I know I still benefited. It's not that my father didn't work so hard to provide for me. He worked extremely hard first to help support his mother, brothers, and sister but then provided for me. He did this despite the presence of antisemitism and being a single father.

But I also realize it is not about whether we enslaved people. It is about the fact that every day, I don't wake up, black and singled out by society for injustice, just because of that.

As I have shared with you, I don't see myself as a prophet, and I am unsure if that is because of God's calling or my cowardice. But as Marilyn McIntyre said, "I do know that I can be moved by a prophetic word when I sense its evidence, conviction, and scriptural roots—by the way, it summons me to change."

Sometimes, I don't like what I hear, and when I do, I try to keep from dismissing it but keep listening for the prophetic word that can change me and bless me. That is where I feel this passage speaks today. It summons us to listen for the prophetic words that call us to change how we think and act and maybe even vote.

I am reminded of this conversation between Pilate and Jesus in John 18:37 When Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this, I was born, and for this, I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” 38 Pilate asked him, “What is truth?” After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, “I find no case against him.

But then we know Pilate went out and was intent on holding onto his power and authority and keeping the peace, gave in to the crowd, ignored the truth, and had Jesus executed.

Jesus is the life and truth of our faith and politics; they are one piece held together in him. So, our life of faith in the world is to be defined by the powerful self-giving of the life of Jesus that reflects God’s love for all people.

I don’t watch a lot of news. I try to keep up to date, but I don’t enjoy all the bitterness and hostility. However, two politicians impressed me in the 2020 election, and I know I have something to offend everyone. But Mike Pence and Pete Buttigieg, both said, “My faith determines my politics.” They disagree, but they both start with their faith. And so should we.

We cannot forget that the tragic, unjust death of Jesus is not the last word. God gets the last word, which is life. God wants abundant life for all people, and that is what we are called to seek through our politics. When we live faithfully in our messy world of politics, there are also the powerful blessings of God for us and others.