

July 14, Ordinary 15B (Mark 6:14–29)

Who knows what took place in Herod's guilty heart after John's death?

by [Marilyn McEntyre](#) in the [July 2024](#) issue

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“Do not fear those who kill the body,” Jesus admonishes his disciples (Matt. 10:28). John the Baptist doesn't. He challenges his listeners—the curious, the skeptical, the hostile—to repent. He confronts authorities, rejects polite conventions, shames hypocrites, and perhaps most offensively, makes a spectacle of himself. Still, his message rings true—even to Herod, who is troubled enough by it to be guilt-ridden and haunted later, after he kills John, by a nervous suspicion that Jesus is John returned from the dead. We may well imagine him pacing the floor of a lavish palace, not in satisfied vengeance but in fear and anxiety.

Mark enables us to see Herod not simply as an agent of evil but as a weak human being who has given way to temptation. But the consequences of his capitulation reverberate widely. Because he is in a position of power, his weakness, cowardice, pride, and shortsightedness have very public and lasting consequences. His predicament is not unlike that of Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, who cries in agonized confession after murdering his brother, “Oh, my offense is rank!” Or like Macbeth, riddled with depression and guilt and emotionally alienated from his vicious, avaricious wife after ordering assassins to kill Duncan. Portraits of weak, lustful, corruptible political leaders are plentiful in history and literature, some of them quite contemporary.

One of the most interesting features of Mark's sketchy profile of Herod comes when the writer pauses to make note of the ruler's emotional predicament even before the foolish agreement that leads to John's beheading. “Herod feared John,” he writes, “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.” This curious concession—that Herod actually found John credible and compelling—and the even stranger note that up until then he had “protected him” complicates our

understanding of Herod. It clarifies that his evil is more cowardly than vicious.

Still, cowardice is a fatal flaw. It puts self-protection first and blinds the coward to the wider, long-term consequences of self-preservation. It can be dressed up with names that normalize it: appeasement, expediency, compromise, consistency, cutting losses. But acting out of fear usually does harm. One valuable question to raise—one that many prophets and protesters have put to leaders who are saving face at enormous expense—is “What are you protecting?” It may be a more useful question than “Do you realize what harm you’re doing?” or “Can’t you see what your actions will unleash?” I would venture to guess—just looking around at what we’re all witnessing in this year of political and humanitarian disasters—that fear, not money, is the root of all evil. Fear of losing power or control, of losing supporters or allies, of exposure and humiliation. It’s one reason so many divine messages begin with “Be not afraid.” Fear leads to death. Courage—literally an open heart—leads to life.

Evil makes for enticing headlines and compelling page-turners, but ultimately it is less interesting, nuanced, or satisfying to hear about than goodness and grace. John’s is a story of goodness and grace, though not one—from what we see in the gospel’s limited portrayal—of softheartedness or camaraderie. John’s life begins as a miracle, in the body of a woman too old to expect to bear a child. His name is given by God. His first act is to celebrate the coming of the Messiah, leaping for joy in his mother’s womb while Jesus is still being knit together in Mary’s. He lives an exuberantly countercultural life of radical trust, confidence, and contentment, sustained by little but the bounty of the earth and the guidance of God. His public ministry draws grateful crowds to repentance, healing, and hope.

And when he speaks truth to the powerful, some of them listen. He disturbs them into awareness with disruptive grace, and they are afraid. Some reject him out of fear. But it isn’t his outspoken enemies who ultimately kill him; it is an anxious man weakened by ambivalence. Herod ends up like those Jesus calls lukewarm, worse in his way than the openly hostile.

Who knows, really, what took place in Herod’s guilty heart after John’s death? Beyond the fear that Jesus may be John returning to haunt him or hunt him down, he had to be eating the bitter fruit of his ambivalence. He had to live with a vengeful woman, surrounded by people who were unlikely to speak truth to him.

What would you do if you knew you had killed—even symbolically—the only one who would speak truth to you? It's not a question only for the powerful or the politically entangled; it's for any of us who find the call to repentance inconvenient or embarrassing and who let that embarrassment lead us to self-betrayal. We need John still: we need the voice of the undomesticated prophet who won't be silenced but who breaks through our defenses to direct our vision toward the one who not only speaks the truth but embodies it, the one who will help us in our fear and our unbelief.