

JESUS AND JOHN

TEXT: Mark 6:14-29

Today's text is probably one of the best known birthday party stories ever! I think we all have probably heard about as much sermonizing on this as we need – or want – to hear. But, as with most stories, there is some “side text” that we tend to overlook in order to focus on the real action. And we must admit that this story has some very real action.

But, today I'm not going to talk about Herod, or Herodias, or her daughter (who is never named in the text, but has become known as Salome). I've often thought how little Mark tells us about the relationship of Jesus with John the Baptist. We do know that they were – sort of - cousins. The Advent stories tell us about Mary and Elizabeth and their sons who were born close to the same time. And we know well the story of John baptizing Jesus in the River Jordan, with the dove descending and God's booming voice acknowledging Jesus as his beloved Son.

But we don't get much information about any relationship between these cousins after their dip in the river. We have plenty of information about Jesus after he began his ministry, but except for the scruffy John emerging from the wilderness, looking pretty buff from eating locusts and honey, he don't see him again until the baptism, then he is again lost until he is arrested and we read today's text telling about his death.

What we do know is that John's death was extremely painful for Jesus. It was the disciples who brought him the news about Herod's acquiescence to the brutal demands of his wife and the resulting beheading of John.

I would guess that John was a pretty lonesome fellow. He seemed to have lived in remote places and to have been restricted to his disciples for fellowship. Just who those disciples might have been is one of the mysteries of John's life, although some

scholars believe that at least some were the same as those that Jesus called. Wouldn't it have been wonderful for John to be able to sit down for a fireside chat with Jesus, to have Jesus put his arm around his shoulder and ask, "How's the ministry going, John?"

But it is difficult to fully grasp how little contact John actually had with Jesus. You may remember the Advent story about Mary and Elizabeth enjoying sharing the news that each of them was expecting a child. During this meeting John and Jesus "met" while they were in the womb, but that hardly counts. Then there was the meeting when Jesus came for baptism. But, all in all, they had very little contact. Remember that John was arrested early in Jesus' ministry, so any opportunity of contact after his arrest was eliminated.

Despite their disparate lives, these two men who rarely crossed paths were destined to be partners all of their short lives. They both were given a unique mission in life.

John's father Zachariah was a priest. According to Luke's gospel, while he was ministering at the altar of incense an angel of the Lord appeared and announced to him that his wife would give birth to a son, whom he was to name John, and that this son would be the forerunner of the Lord. John would be filled with the Holy Spirit. He was never to drink wine or strong drink. He would go as forerunner before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah. He would make the people ready for the coming of the Lord. So John spoke of the coming of the Messiah, but did not know for certain just who that was until Jesus' baptism.

John had been telling people that there would come after him a man who is greater than he, and that man showed up at the Jordan River as John was baptizing folks. At first he didn't recognize who Jesus was, but according to the gospel of John, the Baptizer is quoted as saying: "I saw the Spirit descending like a dove from heaven, and it remained on him. And I did not recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "The one on whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining – this

is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” I have both seen and testified that this man is the Chosen One of God.

The events that accompanied the baptism of Jesus settled it for John; Jesus was the Messiah. No doubt about it. And this John made very clear to those who came to hear him, even his own disciples.

Quite some time passed since that unusual baptism, and today’s text finds John in prison. His stand against sin had certainly gotten Herod’s attention. So John was now limited to reports from his disciples as to what Jesus was teaching and doing. Frankly, this did not fit the “script” John had in his mind.

John and Jesus were very different, and these differences may have begun to bother John. John’s attire certainly set him apart from the crowd, but Jesus seemed to have blended in so far as his clothing was concerned. John and his disciples were known to fast frequently, while Jesus and his disciples ate and drank, with sinners no less. John performed no signs in his earthly ministry, but Jesus (and later his disciples) performed miracles of every kind.

If Jesus was the Messiah, as John had announced, then why didn’t he do something? Why had Jesus not gotten to the business of establishing his kingdom? Well, when he could resist no longer, John sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus directly: Was he the promised Messiah or not? Were the Jewish people to embrace him as the Messiah, or should they look for someone else? Was Jesus their only hope? And that is the most important question we can ever ask or answer. It is just as important to us today as it was to John and his disciples thousands of years ago. So – listen to the words of Jesus for his answer.

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them. Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

But now we come to today's story and there John sits in prison. John's ministry was to tell it like he saw it, and what he saw was Herod's adulterous relationship with his brother's wife, and John loudly condemned the tetrarch. At a dinner party one night, Herod capitulated to the sadistic demand of Herodias' daughter (made at her mother's strong "suggestion"). We are told that Herod regarded John to be a righteous and holy man and that he intended to protect him. But after his brash promise and for the sake of his reputation he conceded and ordered John's execution.

The story of Jesus and John can leave us somewhat perplexed. Here is the way I currently understand this strange relationship. John the Baptist had some doubts about Jesus' identity as the Messiah. This seemed to be because Jesus was not the "forceful" Messiah that John predicted, the one who would come powerfully in judgment of sinners. Jesus seemed to be concerned that a certain element of Israelites who tended toward violence was attracted to John, his ministry and his message. Why? John's ministry was a culmination and climax of all Old Testament prophecy, which was full of the specter of God's violent response to man's disloyalty.

I don't believe that Jesus was seeking to be critical of John or of his ministry. He was simply attempting to show that John's doubts were, in part, a reflection of the spirit of the age – a time when men yearned for Messiah to come in power to cast off Roman rule, to punish the wicked, and to establish God's kingdom. No wonder John had some doubts; Jesus did not seem to be playing out the script John and others had for Messiah in their minds.

I'm wondering if many of us are too much like John – when God fails to work in just the way we expect God to work, we begin to question God. If our Lord really is God, then we should expect God to work in ways that are very different from what we might expect. The claim of God's kingdom upon John's life was ultimate. That meant that the claims of the state and religious establishments, of race, gender, culture and money are, at best, penultimate. The earliest and most radical Christian confession was

simple: “Jesus is Lord”. By direct implication, Caesar is not lord or god, and neither are all the other many false gods of religion, money, sex, power, etc.

With his pronouncement and then martyrdom, John counsels us to turn away from anything and everything that might hinder ultimate allegiance to Jesus. He invites us to make our crooked ways straight, to flatten all hilly terrain, and to prepare space for the birth of the Messiah into our own lives. When we do that, we’ll find ourselves in the truly Good News that subverts and transcends all politics and religion. Amen.