

The Art of God
A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 11, 2021
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King Herod heard of Jesus and his disciples, 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." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

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. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 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. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 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." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." 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." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb. Mark 6:14-29

Aristotle said this about art, "The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance." Van Gogh said, "Art is to console those who are broken by life. Pablo Picasso said, "The purpose of art is washing the dust of daily life off our souls." Art gives us a way to see life, to process what happens around us, and to find meaning in scripture or history or our own personal lives.

When I study scripture before writing a sermon, I often turn to art. Art can reveal feelings and emotions and the intentions of the heart in ways that words sometimes cannot. An artist is an interpreter of life. When we look at a piece of art we can learn about the artist, the events going on around them at the time they created the art, or the way they see life. We can glimpse the emotions and reactions of the characters that are portrayed. Sometimes when we look carefully, we find ourselves in the art.

So this week, when I read the horrendous gospel lesson assigned to us for which I had no words, I turned to art. If you google "Beheading of John the Baptist in art" and spend some time with what you find, you will gain some insight into this passage. I've shared some art for today's gospel in my blog post as well.

We might wonder why Mark would include this sordid story in his gospel. We might wonder why he gave us all the gory details when he usually does not take time for detail. We might wonder where to find any good news in this gospel today. Because Jesus is not a part of it, he's not even mentioned. Mark sets this story in between the sending out of the disciples and their return to share with Jesus everything that had happened. Mark says they cast out many demons and anointed the sick with oil and cured them. It sounds like everything went well, only we know that in life not everything is always going to go well.

I wonder if Mark wanted to help us understand that following Jesus just might be the hardest thing we ever do. Or that some people are going to choose not to follow Jesus, or even do the right thing. I wonder if Mark wanted us to recognize ourselves in this story; to come to the realization that we could be any one of the characters.

As I looked at the ways artists through the centuries have portrayed this event, I noticed that John the Baptist was always present, though often in a gruesome manner. In many paintings, Herod was not present, or if he was, he appeared detached from the whole spectacle. Surely, he was ultimately responsible for the death of John. Or was he? What about Herodias? What about her dancing daughter, known as Salome from other sources? What about the distinguished leaders both religious and political, who were guests at the party and watched the scene unfold? What about the servants filling the wine goblets? What about the executioner and those who assisted him?

Think about these characters and imagine how you might paint this story. Think about what happens and notice how you feel about it. Would you include yourself in the painting? People you know? People you love or people you dislike? I think if we are honest, we are all going to have to be in the painting.

Scripture is filled with beautiful stories and faithful people, and it is also filled with the mistakes of the people of God. Scripture helps us see ourselves as we truly are, reminding us of what we are capable of doing, of becoming. Who among us is perfect? Who among us has not been persuaded by peer pressure, made the easier of two choices, altered the story to make ourselves look better? Who among us has not given in to our pride, our fear, or our own sense of privilege?

Maybe we are thinking we are not at all like Herod. I mean, we've never actually had anyone put to death, after all; though perhaps we have thrown someone under the bus, or hung onto our pride at the expense of another's reputation. Maybe we have said unkind things about others or remained silent when truth needed to be spoken. Maybe, like so many people in today's gospel account we have simply stood by and let unkind, hurtful, or horrendous things happen.

At first, there seems to be no good news in this story. But perhaps Mark included it to show us just how much we are in need of God's saving grace. To remind us that all have sinned in thought, word, and deed by things done and left undone.

We are not so different than the people and the artists who painted them through the centuries. We are not so different than the people who attended Herod's banquet. And here, I think, is where we might find the good news. The good news that God already knows our hearts and loves us still. The good news that repentance and forgiveness provide a new canvas, and that God, the master artist, will, with the brush of forgiveness, paint a new canvas of our life, using the palette of mercy, grace, and love.

We can become paintings with inward significance, we can console those who are broken by life, and we can wash the dust of daily life off our souls as we open our eyes and our lives to the light of Christ. Amen.