



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

In Herod's Court

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 6:17-25

February 20, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Hallie Hottle

We are currently in this sermon series on “Wilderness,” where we’re preaching our way through the gospel of Mark. So, when Tom asked me to preach today, he told me the text he was using last week and next week, so that I could pick something in the middle.

And he reminded me that the beheading of John the Baptist was in this section, and then he did something he should not have done: He made a little joke as if surely I wouldn’t choose this story. So naturally... today’s reading comes from the beheading of John the Baptist.

This is one of those stories that when you hear it, it’s hard to get out of your mind. It’s an unusual story in every way. Do you know it? It’s a strange one. But I think we owe it some attention because of how much time and energy Mark gives it. The tradition knows that John was beheaded. But how... why... the narrative that unfolds around it—this only appears in Mark’s gospel.

This is curious because we know that Mark was written first. It’s the earliest of the gospels and it was used as a source by the other gospel writers. There are parts of Mark that the others straight-up copied.

But not this one. No. Matthew consolidates this drama into a more matter-of-fact scene. Luke mentions in his narrative that John was beheaded. But Mark stands alone in this storytelling. And this is out of character for Mark. As Tom has been teaching us, Mark is not overly concerned with details. Mark’s favorite word is “immediately.” He doesn’t even include Jesus’ birth story. Just gets right to it.

But here, here our author pauses. He seems to switch style and tone. Right before this story is the one mentioned in our children’s message. A much better story. It’s the mission of the disciples. Jesus

sends them out, two by two, with the power to cast out demons and heal the sick. This is really as good as it gets in Mark—the peak of the gospel. They go and are wildly successful.

They later return from their journey and gather around Jesus with tales to tell. Eventually, they will feed the 5,000. And right into the center of that story, we have this one. Mark *interrupts* the peak of his own gospel. It seems to me, Mark is asking us to pay attention.

We’ve been in the wilderness with Jesus. But here, we enter the court of Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, the king. John had been preaching against Herod for marrying his brother’s wife. I think we hear that and understand it sounds like a problem. But more than just causing strife at the family reunion, this was banned in Hebrew law.

Beyond just being against the law, there’s a potential political problem here. Herod’s brother Philip is the ruler of the area immediately east of Herod’s territory. This marriage has put these two rulers at odds with each other and as our modern world knows too well: Political rivals sharing a border is a dangerous thing.

The text tells us that Herodias, the wife in question, had a “grudge” against John. It’s a strange word: “enecho.” This is the only time it’s used in Mark. It means something like, “to be entangled with.” So Herodias has this grudge; she is entangled with this prophet John.

Art and culture have been creative with Herodias and her daughter. They often appear as seductresses, receiving John’s head with joy. I’m not sure that’s a fair depiction. What happens to them if King Herod decides to listen to this noisy prophet? This is not a system that lets them retreat quietly. In the king’s court, Herodias’s entanglement with Herod, with

Philip, with John... is a matter of life and death.

And so, this story goes. There is a birthday banquet for the king. And the daughter of Herodias comes in to dance. Scripture doesn't name her but she's remembered by history as "Salome." And her dancing so pleased the king that, perhaps, motivated by excessive food and drink, he tells her that he will give her whatever she desires.

The girl runs to her mother. And here: We have the only conversation that is recorded in all of scripture between a mother and a daughter. Salome asks, "What should I ask for?" And Herodias replies, in all the drama Mark intends, "I want you to give me the head of John the Baptist."

The king is "deeply grieved" it says. It seems kings are often deeply grieved, while simultaneously doing the thing that we're supposed to believe grieves them. And just like that, John—the promised child of Elizabeth and Zechariah. John—who called rich and poor, ordinary and powerful, to the river in the wilderness that all might repent and hear the good news—John is beheaded because of a drunken promise to a dancing girl at a birthday banquet.

This is a fantastical, made-for-TV kind of story. It's bizarre. The way it is written and located here in Mark adds to the strangeness. And the content of the story, the details that unfold, are whimsically gruesome—bordering on absurd. If I understand the text, that's the point. Sure, this is foreshadowing Jesus' death. And more than that, it's a cautionary tale to any who want to follow Jesus' way, for all the disciples are killed similarly.

But I have to wonder: If Mark was just trying to give us a hint as to what was coming, I think our most concise writer would have done that with much fewer words. No, I think Mark tells this story *how* and *where* he does to invite us into the absurdity. He wants us to sit a moment at Herod's table, so we might recognize it when we end up there again.

I think this story has been stuck in my head because there's something about it that feels familiar in our own wild days. It seems the topic of most conversations I've been having lately is about how strange life feels right now.

Now, two years in a global pandemic, almost one-million lives lost—just in our own nation alone.

Our politics have reached a new level of personal, as we attack one another instead of protecting one another. Our posturing has reached a new level of absurd, as we pretend to not know why workers aren't returning to jobs for low wages as billionaires are orbiting the planet. We're spending thousands on NFTs, which no one quite understands, while my neighbors can't afford groceries. If you feel like the world is upside down, I think that's because it is.

I wonder if part of what Mark is doing by putting this story in here this way, is reminding us that this gospel—this story of good news where disciples are sent out two by two and crowds are healed—it's happening in the same place and time when kings ruled and violence was common and banquets were plentiful. The contrast Mark is painting isn't so that we might choose the right way. It's a reminder that these two contrasting scenes are *always* present. Neither exists without the other. Choosing one doesn't free us from the other. Herod's court and Jesus's wilderness are inextricably entangled.

Last summer, I watched along with the rest of you, as our involvement in the war in Afghanistan ended in a particular flourish of chaos. We entered that war when I was in high school. Some of my friends joined the military to be part of it. We've been warring there my entire adult life.

There's a lot that's been said about our withdrawal from Afghanistan. I imagine it will continue to be discussed by people who study such things forever and ever.

But I was watching it with my newborn on my lap and it hit a little differently that way. The world looks different when you welcome a baby into it. I can't quite explain that yet. I'm still learning. But I can tell you it's true. And when I saw the image, like the rest of you, of the baby being passed over the wall at the airport—I can tell you I felt that image.

There's a lot that has been said about what happened there. Political stances to take. Blame to go around. But some of you kept watching and you kept asking and when our local news informed us that hundreds of refugees from Afghanistan were on their way to being relocated in our own city, you came here, to your church, and asked what we could do.

It took us a minute to figure out. But by the fall,

we were talking with Jewish Vocational Services (JVS)—one of the organizations in charge of refugee relocation—and we began to organize. Last weekend, Pastor Melanie and I loaded up cars and trucks with about 20 of you and 108 items of furniture and home goods that you all donated and went to set up a home for a family of six from Afghanistan.

You worked all morning—cleaning and turning this small house into something like a home. And some of you heroes stayed into the afternoon finishing the most difficult piece of this entire endeavor: IKEA bunkbeds.

After we were done, I got word that the family would move in sometime during the week and needed groceries. I emailed some of y'all and asked if anyone could go shopping. Again, you did that. And I noticed: all your bags had a couple extra items inside.

It was Wednesday before the family moved in. By the time I got the call, there wasn't time to organize, so I went by myself to drop off the groceries. The JVS case worker greeted me and helped to translate as I met and greeted the family. And then... the case worker let me know he had to take off and the mom simultaneously asked me to sit. She was making tea.

I don't know as much about Afghan culture as I wish I did. But I know enough to know that you don't leave when tea is offered. So there I sat. Watching her son play outside with the soccer ball we had left. Being greeted by the youngest daughter as she proudly showed me the art supplies we had put together. And being served tea from a saucepan... as I immediately realized we didn't bring a teapot.

I stayed for an hour as this sweet family practiced their new English with me. When we couldn't figure out the words, we resorted to showing each other photos from our phones to explain. And when we ran out of things to talk about, we shared the universal language: baby photos. I showed them photos of my baby, Charlie. And the dad got emotional, as his best friend, he said, a U.S. soldier, was named Charlie. "He got us out," he choked. "He got us out."

That's all I know about how they left their country. I didn't ask more. There will be time and we'll

listen if they want to tell us. But this big mess of a thing we watched unfold on our news screens... it didn't matter, as we sat drinking tea out of a saucepan. They're just a family with kids navigating a new school, glad to have soccer balls and art supplies. Despite our language barrier, it was a completely normal encounter. A simple table conversation with new friends.

I think that's because I was at the right table. A table donated by one of you. A table set up by Stan, who had to take it apart twice because I kept asking him to move it. A table situated in the wide wilderness that Jesus lives in, calling us to continue the mission.

Mark puts this story in the middle of his gospel with drama that makes us to pay attention. Perhaps it's precisely when the world seems the most absurd, when violence seems most bent on winning, it's then that the mission is most needed.

The wilderness and Herod's court—they're entangled. Following Jesus doesn't allow us to ignore Herod's court. John teaches us that. But following Jesus *does* mean we have to constantly return to the wilderness, check which table we're at, be sure we're about the healing and not the beheading. Village Church: The mission is most needed in these days. There is a cacophony of chaos happening around us. And it's exhausting. I won't tell you to ignore it. Herod's court always requires us to pay attention.

But Jesus is still in the wilderness, calling those who can hear, casting out the demons, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, housing the stranger.

Mark locates this story here, how he does, in order to say, look: This is always the case.

So pay attention to the power.

But don't give it all your energy.

Pay attention to the chaos around you.

But don't let it into your soul.

Pay attention to what is hard.

But don't stop looking for what is possible.

For your work is in the wilderness.

Let us pray: God of every day—heal us, feed us, call us, equip us—to serve you, and only you, in this and every day. Amen.