

July 12, 2015
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Mark 6:14-29

Flashback

Today's gospel reading tells its tale in a backward looking way. It begins with a report that Jesus' widening fame has him mistaken for John the Baptist—but that can't be, because John the Baptist is dead. Then today's gospel reading tells how it all happened, how it was that John died, all the things that led up to it. It's an account of the past inserted into the narrative present. When that happens in television and movies, it's called a flashback. The gospel reading today is almost entirely a flashback, and a gruesome, a sordid, one at that. If this Bible story were a movie, it would be rated R, for John the Baptist didn't just die, he was executed, beheaded, beheaded at the request of young girl, a girl who danced for a leering king, a political leader whose marriage was an incestuous mix of ill-will and lavish waste and weak leadership. Game of Thrones and House of Cards have nothing on Mark chapter 6.

How did it all get there, to that horrific scene, to the execution, the beheading of John the Baptist? The flashback says that it all started with a broken law. There's this political leader, the king, Herod, who breaks the law by marrying his brother's wife, who happens to have a name very similar to his: Herodias. The names and relationships are complicated. Herodias is not biologically related to Herod, but their marriage is still against the law; I'm guessing Herod's brother wasn't too happy about it, either. There's something off about this relationship, it's bad, and John the Baptist calls them out on it. John the Baptist speaks truth to power, and is imprisoned for it. Herodias wants more than this, but Herod doesn't act on this, not at first. Herod is a complicated character, he's weak, subject to whims and unable to stand up to others, and yet also monstrously powerful. He's the one who has John beheaded, we are told that, right from the beginning of the story, Herod's a bad guy—and yet there's also this detail, right in the middle of the flashback, Herod likes to listen to John.

Meanwhile, Herodias continues to look for an opportunity to get back at John. "An opportunity came," the story says, or, in an even more precise and ominous translation, "a happy day for her arrived," that day, being Herod's birthday. Herod throws a great big party and invites all the other leaders, other big wigs in the area, to come. And at this party his daughter dances—or maybe it was his stepdaughter, and her name may also have been Herodias, or Salome... the historical and biblical accounts are complicated, as is the scene: a gathering of a group of statesmen, having a young girl dance for them. The scene just gets more disturbing, as is Herod's reaction, his pleasure. There's a lurid undertone to it all, a reckless and sick abandon to Herod, who, excited by what he's seen, tells the dancing girl to ask him for anything.

Still out of breath, the girl runs to her mother—for advice. Mother seizes the opportunity: get John the Baptist out of the way for good, "Ask for his head!" Note then the girl's response, how the girl takes the suggestion and runs with it, she runs back to Herod. It is the girl who adds on the final, gruesome detail. "Give me John's head," she repeats, and adds, "...on a platter!"

Mark 6 is such a dark tale for a summer Sunday morning. The Bible should be rated R. There are so many twists and turns in this gospel story, complications which get worse and worse. It begins with a bad decision, breaking a law for self-gratification, grows into a grudge, widens to embroil witnesses, inveigles innocence into a complicity that becomes creative sadism, twists and ties the power of one who could act differently, but instead lets barbarism be the rule of the day.

That's how it all got there, the flashback explains, that's how they arrived at a party with

a head on a platter, that's how John the Baptist was killed. You see all of that, when you go backwards in the narrative. And then this story ends, with the disciples of John taking his body, and laying it in a tomb.

Horrific scenes, not just in the Bible, but in the narrative of people's lives: How does someone arrive in court, for another DUI... maybe this time they've injured another driver or passenger, or a pedestrian ... their license, their livelihood, lives, all at stake. How does someone arrive at the other end of the phone, in the middle of the night, crying, she's with someone and it's not good, how did she get there? How do we arrive but by twists and turns: one drink too many, and then another; a bad relationship, and then another that's even worse; a broken vow, a broken law, a grudge, power abandoned for powerlessness, abusiveness. How do we arrive at such horrific scenes?

We are a general audience, we who gather here in church on a Sunday morning. We are a general audience, but we know that life, like the Bible, is not all rated G. We know—we are—people who know flashbacks, people who have flashbacks.

The death of John the Baptist is the only flashback in Mark's gospel. This story we hear today is the only time in all of this gospel that the narrative present looks back. But in a way, all of the gospel is a flashback. All of the gospel, all of the story of Jesus, is told while looking backwards. I didn't used to think of it like that, back when I first heard Bible stories as a little girl. It may not seem like that, when we read the gospel sequentially, as we've been doing in church this summer. We've been progressing through Mark, Sunday to Sunday, from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, to his widening fame, to his expanding ministry across the other side of the lake, to his expanding mission, including his disciples as emissaries. We've been reading the gospel, chapter by chapter, as if the events were written down as they happened.

But of course, that is not how the gospel was recorded. No one wrote it down as it happened. No, it was some time later they collected the stories, and wrote them down, these stories of a man named Jesus. It's all flashback, because it was only by looking back that they understood what happened, how he died, that what looked like a scene of ultimate horror, execution on a cross, was God arriving at the worst that the world and we could do, and overcoming it. In the cross, God says that the darkest twists and turns of life have no power over us.

And so it is that the story of the death of John the Baptist is both a flashback and a foreshadowing. Like John the Baptist, Jesus spoke truth to power, and was imprisoned, as a political leader washed his hands of power, and had him killed. As with John the Baptist, Jesus' disciples took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

But the gospel doesn't end there. Early on a Sunday morning, Jesus' disciples went to the tomb—and found it empty. They found that God's love for us was greater even than death. They found that Jesus had given them a different story, a different way of living, with hope for a different life to come. They found that they, too, could speak truth to power. They found themselves telling the stories about Jesus, and writing them down, so that other people can read it, hear it, live differently, because of it.

Whatever scene you are in, and however you have arrived there, whatever horrors you may have known, that is not the end of the story. We gather in church on Sunday mornings and look back. In the rite of confession we look back at our lives, at their twists and turns. In the reading of the Bible we look back at the life of Jesus. We gather in church on Sunday mornings, to look back, so we can look forward. We gather on Sunday mornings, the day and time of Jesus' rising, because Jesus' resurrection foreshadows ours as well.