

“LOSING OUR CERTITUDE IN LENT”

Mark 6.14-31

The Rev. Karl Travis

February 14, 2018/Ash Wednesday

Mention John the Baptist and most minds drift instantly to locusts and wild honey. Particularly astute biblical scholars will remember also the bit about making “straight in the desert a highway for God,” which John quoted from Old Testament Isaiah in order to explain himself. John said too that he was “not worthy to carry [Jesus’] sandals. ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 3.11).

Such reads the resume of the Bible’s most famous supporting actor. Texan John Nance Garner was one of Franklin Roosevelt’s Vice Presidents. He once quipped that being Vice President wasn’t “worth a bucket of warm spit.” John the Baptist didn’t seem to mind being number two, however, playing second fiddle, being the wing man. As John’s Gospel has it, [John] “himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.”

Now maybe you didn’t come to Ash Wednesday worship expecting to think about John the Baptist. It’s a bit unorthodox, I’ll admit. Well, we will admit. Michael, Josh, and Robyn are in on it. We’re straying from the Lenten lectionary this Wednesday and the next six in order to think about characters of the passion. After John the Baptist, we’re throwing in the High Priests; Mary Magdalene; John, the “other disciple;” Herod; Simon of Cyrene; the temple merchants; Peter; Judas Iscariot; and Pontius Pilate. Understanding the passion narrative from these various viewpoints might illuminate our Lenten journey this year, might lead us to deeper understandings of the pain and trial of the final week.

And surely, by the end of that last sentence, you’ve already pieced together that John the Baptist wasn’t even there. True that. John was dead before the week of Jesus’ passion. Which might make him an odd lead-off for such a Lenten escapade.

But hang with me.

Because Lent is a season of penitence, a time to consider our faithfulness as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem in order to benefit us in every which way. And John’s loyalty, his faithfulness, his tried-and-true-bearing-witness-to-Jesus might shine just a bit upon our own discipleship.

Especially as we consider the cost to John of his faithful truth telling.

So we kick Lent off by meeting John, but only posthumously, at least in this chapter of Mark’s gospel. Word has reached Herod about Jesus, and people are speculating about exactly who Jesus is. Some are conjecturing that Jesus is actually the resurrected John, back from the dead. Now that’s quite a thought, isn’t it, that Jesus’ authority was so strongly foreshadowed by John’s that people actually wonder about John’s return from the dead.

Mark’s mere mention of the idea sends the gospel into a literary flashback to explain exactly how John died. And the story is not the stuff of Christmas cards.

Herod arrests John, ties him up, and throws him into the dungeon. There are no public defenders to rally the cause, of course, and the concept of civil rights would be laughed out of Herod’s court. John is defenseless against such authoritarian shenanigans. John’s crime? Telling Herod the truth.

You see, Herod has committed a serious transgression, at least by Jewish standards. On a visit to Rome he stays with his half-brother Herod II and there – to put it delicately – he falls in love with his half-brother’s wife. Her name is Herodias. (Rolls of the tongue, doesn’t it?)

It isn’t clear exactly what most offends John. There are multiple divorces involved, and the divorce timelines are murky, but surely most concerning is that Herodias is Herod II’s half-niece, which makes both relationships incestuous.

If this isn’t enough, let’s throw in politics. Herod’s first wife is the daughter of the king of Nabatea. When Herod divorces her, she flees home to her father who proceeds to declare war on Herod.

So, John’s public condemnation of Herod is particularly stinging, embarrassing. He marries his brother’s wife. The marriage is incestuous. It caused a war, which Herod loses gloriously, by the way.

Hence, in *Exhibit A* of the *Kill the Messenger Encyclopedia*, Herod arrests John and throws him in the dock.

You know the rest of the story. Herod throws himself a birthday party. Herodias' daughter dances. With his tongue well lubed with alcohol, Herod promises anything the girl asks. She deliberates with her mother and comes back with their awful demand: John's head on a platter. The order is fulfilled. Herodias receives her prize. John's disciples collect and bury his body.

It is a terrible story, and not often preached, and when you think about it Ash Wednesday might just be the only time, and the best time, to bring it up. After all, we are here lurching toward a Lenten journey to Jerusalem, following Jesus who is willing to sacrifice everything in the name of subversive love and redemptive vulnerability.

On one level, John's example is about seeing and speaking truth, even to those in power, even at personal cost. But that's an old lesson, and an obvious one.

What lurks beneath John's example is subtler, and harder, and therefore more important. Especially right now. And here it is.

Where do we get the courage to follow Jesus even when it's going to cost us?

Let's picture John the Baptist. Bring him into your mind's eye. Herod's henchmen arrive for the arrest and return for the beheading.

How do you imagine John? Is he the fiery prophet, loud and boisterous, full of certainty and bluster? Does his heart stay calm, his voice stay strong, his eyes stay wide?

I don't think so. That's not how I picture John at all, and my imagination is illustrated by the example of the one whose sandals John feels unworthy to carry. In his passion, Jesus asks that the cup be removed from him. He prays for a way out that will not require his pain and death. Jesus of Nazareth, incarnate son of the God most High, is afraid. Vulnerable. Humble.

So it stands to spiritual reason that one who came to "make straight his path" would be likewise the same. I picture John, a lump in his throat, his eyes dancing nervously about, his voice shaky with air and stutter, his heart pounding near out of his chest.

In my own life, and from what I have heard from others, if bravery finally arrives it is always accompanied by fear, and every act of courage requires vulnerability.

That last phrase comes from Brené Brown. She's a social science researcher and professor of social work in Houston, and she's hailed as a wise woman. She has done comprehensive research on courage and vulnerability. Interestingly, she also delivered one of the five most watched TED Talks in history.¹ In a recent interview with Krista Tippett, Brown says this: "Because we have lost our capacity for pain and discomfort, we have transformed that pain into hatred and blame. It's so much easier for people to cause pain than it is for them to feel their own pain."²

Not to psychologize a long dead Roman wife, but how might this story have been different if Herodias had faced her own pain and vulnerability rather than blaming John the Baptist for calling her out? As for Herod, imagine how vulnerability can temper a leader's dealings with those under his care.

Ash Wednesday, it seems to me, beckons us onto a path of discipleship which may well require obedience that scares out pants off. Bracing for the fray, then, getting ready, might just require us to search and name what we're frightened to lose, to lose in the name of following Jesus, the loss of which might bring us pain.

What ambitions do we feed,
what false securities do we nourish,
what dependencies do we bless,
which left untended will
guide us to detour and distraction
on the road to Jerusalem?

What has gotten in discipleship's way which, when confronted, will bring us pain?

Last January we took the men of First Pres on the first men's retreat in anyone's memory. We hired an author, a business consultant, to lead the retreat. We broke into small groups and introduced our

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability

² "Strong Back, Soft Front, Wild Heart," On Being with Krista Tippett, broadcast February 8, 2018, <https://onbeing.org/programs/brene-brown-strong-back-soft-front-wild-heart-feb2018/>

retreat leader who immediately offered an introductory question to get the ball rolling. I expected the sort of softball question that most often serves as a starting point.

“Share with your group how you made your first dollar.”

“If you could be anywhere right now, where would you be?”

“If you were an animal, what animal would choose?”

You know the sort of question.

The consultant spoke. “Tell us,” he said, “about your deepest pain.”

I prepared to make my break for the door.

But the men at my table started speaking. The volume across the room rose. Every man in that banquet hall responded to that question, and about the only thing the evaluations agreed upon was that we needed more time for small group discussion.

So here’s the Lenten logic.

There’s nothing like taking a knee and rubbing ashes on your forehead to make you feel vulnerable. And there’s nothing like feeling vulnerable to remind us upon whom we may depend. And there’s nothing like depending on God to give us the courage to be obedient.

Vulnerability leads to courage leads to obedience, and there, just then, we meet Jesus.

Lent may not cost us our heads, but it might cost us our certitude. And there, just then, we meet Jesus.

Mark 6.14-31

King Herod heard of it, 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.

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.