

The title for today's message is: **John the Baptizer's Death**

Mark tells us that Salome requested of Herod: **"I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."**

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Ever since the beginning, prophets have lived on a collision course with what is called, "the powers that be."

No doubt the prophetic word, has nearly always had its problems winning popularity contests, that is in the so-called "real world!"

Throughout the history of the church, there has always been a tension between faith and politics.

And as we all know, Jesus gave an answer to this problem, He said to the Roman authorities: "My kingdom is not of this world."

Now on the other hand, when asked about paying taxes, Jesus does not incite rebellion, or non-compliance.

Rather, he instructs the people to follow the law, He said: "render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God."

Just as the apostle Paul, in his writings, counsels Christians to be loyal and obedient citizens to the civil authorities.

We Lutherans have been a little too cozy with "the powers that be," and the prophetic voice, and presence has been muted or forgotten in the process!

Therefore, at crucial times, the church has failed to speak the necessary prophetic word, holding civil authorities accountable for their policies.

The consequence, on occasion, as we all know too well, has proven to be catastrophic!

Yet, consider today's gospel. Here we have a different picture altogether. A prophet and a prophet's word, ending catastrophically nonetheless.

It's a most interesting story, which was sandwiched in-between Jesus having sent His disciples on a mission, which we heard about last week.

You remember they were sent out preaching the need to repent, teaching God's Word and healing those who were in need.

This is a story, when read for the first time, might not seem to have anything to do with what precedes and follows it.

But a more careful reading of it certainly convinces us otherwise. Notice the story actually begins with reports regarding the work of Jesus and His disciples.

It even presupposes that John has already been executed; since Jesus is regarded by "the powers that be" as possibly being John the Baptist raised from the dead.

Or, Elijah, or one of the other ancient Israelite prophets. Mark tells us in verse 16 that Herod seems to have mistaken Jesus' for a resurrected John.

The reason for this, we note, is the rumor mill reporting about the mission of Jesus and his disciples, their preaching, teaching, and healing.

Now before we go any further into this tragic story of John's beheading its necessary for us to clarify a couple of things about Herod, Herodias and the daughter.

According to biblical scholars, this Herod is not the same Herod the Great, who ordered the slaughter of the children around the time of Jesus' birth.

Rather, this is Herod the Great's son, Now According to the secular Jewish historian of the time, Josephus.

Herod, while on one occasion visiting Rome, seduced his brother Philip's wife, Herodias.

And Herodias likely agreed to the seduction hoping that her fortunes would improve.

Now when John the Baptist learned of this new political union, between Herod and Herodias.

He did the right thing, that is as a faithful and holy Jewish prophet. John spoke out against Herod's marriage to Herodias.

John told Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." Of course, John was referring here to two passages from the Torah.

Both, in the book of Leviticus, wherein it is basically regarded as an act of adultery, and publicly disgraceful.

Therefore making those involved, ritually impure. And the consequence was that, such a marriage would not be blessed with children.

It obviously took considerable courage on the part of John, to speak as a prophet to one of the highest political authorities of his day.

But John is one of the Lord's prophets, and so he faithfully does what a prophet is called to do, be God's trustworthy spokesman.

But, John as a prophet suffered the tragic consequences of speaking and living by God's prophetic word.

And we too as Christians, are called to speak God's word in the face of evil, as well as injustice.

So we too, like John, and others, are called even to die if necessary for speaking and living by God's word.

Now after John speaks to Herod, Herod doesn't act on it immediately, even though he was greatly offended by it.

Yet, Ironically, through Mark he says that Herod "liked to listen to John." Why is this?

Well, most likely deep within Herod's heart mind and soul, he knew what John spoke was the truth.

So, instead of being offended, and wanting to punish, or do away with John, Herod protected John.

As one called to be God's voice in Jesus day as well as today, this is, and would be a sign of encouragement.

The truth of God's Word has the power to touch, even the most corrupt of politicians.

So, we must never lose hope in the power of God's word working in our life, and in the lives of even the world's most powerful.

Now, in the case of John the Baptist, we learn that Herodias was inflamed and greatly offended by John's words.

In fact, she had such a great grudge against John, she wanted to kill him." But she had to wait for the opportune time.

Herodias finally saw her opportunity at the banquet celebrating Herod's birthday.

Now as the evening unfolded, and everyone there, was thoroughly wined and dined, if you will.

The scheming, plotting Herodias, sends out her own daughter to dance like some seductive prostitute in front of all the guests.

Look, our text bids us to look at ourselves through the person of Herod. Have we, like him, made foolish promises to impress others?

Promises that, we too have lived to regret, perhaps for the rest of our lives? In this horrible story of John's untimely death, no one is really a winner.

John least of all, for he's put to death; most likely Herod is destined to live with a guilty conscience for the rest of his life.

And Herodias, with her sinful request, succeeded in eroding any level of trust she had with Herod.

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Now according to Josephus, Herod and Herodias lost favor with the authorities in Rome, finally living, and dying in exile in the state of Gaul.

So for what purpose was this story written? What did Mark see in it that made it so important, that he squeezed it into his Gospel here.

Of course with the purpose of reminding us all that John's story is actually a foreshadowing of Jesus' story.

Jesus, like John would be totally innocent of the worldly powers' charges made against him.

Jesus, like John would be executed by the worldly "powers that be" more out of political preservation and expedience than anything else.

Yet, according to Mark such stories are true because they give us hope that God is still at work in our lives, yes, even in politicians' lives!

In such stories we are filled with hope, that God's Word changes lives for the better in spite of, evil and tragedy.

Amen.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all. Amen.