

**July 15, 2018**

**Mark 6: 14-29**

Prayer: Dear Lord, Please be with us as we go to your Word. Illuminate these texts that we might understand what you want us to understand. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

### **Flashbacks**

I have been in a season of flashbacks.

I've done funeral services for my best friend's father and an old friend's brother, both of which required deep dives into memories.

Then one of my best friends from high school came back to town to fix up her parents' home for sale.

I spent many, many nights and weekends in that house, so it's been bittersweet going back in, seeing old photos, remembering all that time from the 1960s and '70s.

And occasionally discovering that my memory is no worse than anybody else's.

One day this summer, Robin mentioned that her grown children had visited while she was clearing out furniture. She took them up behind the house to McCarter pool. She told them this was where she'd grown up swimming, and how funny it was that the steep hill she remembered was actually a rather mildly graded entrance.

And I said, "Robin, you didn't go to McCarter pool. You went to McForest. And it did have a very steep hill."

So she and I drove over to the former site of McForest pool, which was wedged into the woods between Shannon Drive and Rockmont Road. The steep driveway was closed because there was no pool anymore. It had been removed and the forest allowed to take it over.

Robin was glad to know that her memory of a steep hill was correct. I was glad I remembered anything that someone else didn't.

In August, my third mystery novel, *Death of a Jester*, should be out in the United States. As I was writing it on sabbatical last year, I thought I needed to explain why the character Malachi, who had such insight into solving murders, was living under a bridge.

So I wrote a flashback to his days in Desert Storm. Malachi saw something so horrific there that he'd been dealing *with his flashbacks* ever since by drinking. His alcoholism made him homeless, but it hadn't taken away his intellect or his innate goodness.

Flashbacks are a fact of life. They can be pleasant, in the case of good childhood memories, or they can be devastating, as in the case with many of our veterans.

Flashbacks are also a necessary literary device. At some point, an author is going to need to explain something in the past to account for something that's happening in the present.

And so we come to today's Scripture passage, which is a literary flashback. While telling about Jesus's ministry, the gospel writer Mark flashes back to the murder of John the Baptist. But he also sandwiches the flashback into another story as he so often does.

He wants the flashback to comment on the action that is currently taking place. And that action is ... the sending out of the 12.

Jesus sends the 12 disciples out two by two to travel among the villages and cast out demons, cure the sick and preach repentance. Then comes the flashback. Then the disciples return to tell Jesus about their mission.

So please turn with me to **Mark 6: 14-29**, and let's read this flashback that Mark inserts right after the disciples depart. The Herod in the story is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great who reigned when Jesus was born.

14 King Herod heard of it, (meaning Jesus' healing and teaching and sending out the 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.'<sup>15</sup> But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.'

<sup>16</sup>But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

17 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. <sup>18</sup>For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'

<sup>19</sup>And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, <sup>20</sup>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.

<sup>21</sup>But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. <sup>22</sup>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.'<sup>23</sup> And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.'

<sup>24</sup>She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.'<sup>25</sup> 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.'

<sup>26</sup>The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.<sup>27</sup> Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison,<sup>28</sup> brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.<sup>29</sup> When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

In this text, Herodias is the name of the daughter as well as the mother. But other manuscripts indicate that may have been an error and should have read "the daughter of Herodias." The ancient historian Josephus says her name was Salome.

Herod Antipas was the ruler of Galilee, where Jesus has spent most of his ministry up until now. When Herod heard about all these miracles that Jesus – and now his disciples – were performing, he wondered who this Jesus might be. Could he be the risen Elijah? Could he be the reincarnation of another old prophet?

Or could he, as Herod fears, be the risen John the Baptist?

Herod has a guilty conscience, and he thinks Jesus might indeed be the dead John.

Why does he think that? Mark gives us a flashback to show how Herod murdered John. He knew he was wrong when he did it. And now he's worried that Jesus is a resurrected John the Baptist.

Years before, he had visited his half-brother, Herod Philip, in Rome. There he fell in love with Philip's wife, Herodias, and persuaded her to desert Philip. Herod Antipas also deserted his wife, and married his sister-in-law.

It was a scandal, breaking every Jewish law of marriage, breaking God's commandments about adultery and coveting.

Needless to say, John the Baptist had plenty to say about it.

Herod may not have liked what John said, but apparently he feared and respected the prophet enough to leave him alone. But Herodias simply hated him.

In a story that sounds as if it came from the Old Testament, she got her opportunity for revenge when Herod threw himself a birthday party. Her daughter danced for the guests of the party. Her stepfather was so pleased he offered to give her anything she wanted, up to half his kingdom.

She went to her mother, who predictably asked for ... the head of John the Baptist. Herod Antipas was "**deeply grieved.**" But he felt compelled to keep his oath. And so he ordered John's beheading.

In many ways, this death of John foreshadows the death of Jesus that will come later. Like Herod, Pilate will be deeply grieved at what he must do to Jesus. But when the crowds clamor for his death, he will give in and order Jesus' execution.

Mark tells us that when John's disciples heard about John's death, **“they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.”** Jesus' disciples will do exactly the same thing.

But something else is going on here as well. After this long, extended flashback – which is the longest passage in all the gospels that doesn't deal directly with Jesus – Mark returns to his first story. He returns to the sending of the 12.

The very next words after John's disciples lay him in the tomb are these: **“The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught.”** (Mark 6: 30)

By now, we should be getting used to this technique in Mark. He starts a story, then inserts a second story, then finishes the first. We've seen it with Jairus' daughter and the hemorrhaging woman, then Jairus' daughter. We've seen it with the cursing of the fig tree, then the cleansing of the temple, then the coming back to see the dead fig tree.

We know Mark does it on purpose because in this story about Jesus sending out the 12, Matthew and Luke tell us the same thing but in more straightforward ways.

Matthew tells of the death of John the Baptist four chapters away from the sending of the 12. Luke mentions the part about Herod wondering who Jesus is, but doesn't tell how Herod had previously killed John the Baptist.

So clearly Mark is telling his story in such a way so as to highlight the account of John the Baptist's violent death. He wants to relate John's horrible death to the sending out of the 12 disciples.

There was no reason to tell the story this way – *unless* Mark wanted us to think about the mission of the disciples in light of John's death. Which, of course, is exactly what he wanted us to do.

To think about discipleship in light of John's death.

To think about discipleship in light of Jesus' impending death.

In preparing the disciples for life without him, Jesus gave them some directions. Go two by two. Travel light. Shake the dust off your feet if people don't want to hear you.

And he gave them power: Preach repentance. Cast out demons. Cure the sick.

But all these things were done in the shadow of what happened to Jesus' forerunner. John the Baptist died for speaking this truth. Jesus will die for speaking this truth.

Jesus is warning his disciples that this world may ultimately do worse than **“not welcome you and refuse to hear you,”** as he says in verse 11. This world may do to you what it did to John, what it will do to me.

Christian discipleship was never supposed to be easy. I think one of the biggest sins of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the notion of a health and wealth gospel, of preachers promising riches and prosperity for believing. That has never, ever been the Christian gospel.

The Christian gospel is about sacrifice, radical sacrifice. It is about loving our neighbor as ourselves.

That is why we Christians must speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves. That is why we must speak up for refugees fleeing violence in Honduras and Guatemala and other dangerous homelands in Central America.

That is why we must speak up for traumatized children separated from their parents.

That is why we must speak up for Dreamers brought to this country as babies and toddlers and knowing no other home.

That is why we cannot let Christianity be usurped by those who would lie and say it means something it doesn't.

Because Jesus was pretty doggoned clear about how we are to treat people.

Now if you are like me, your email inbox is filled daily with at least 12 to 15 pleas to speak out, to step up, to write your Congressman, to call your Senator, to chip in \$3. It can be overwhelming and confusing. You can experience compassion fatigue, to wonder how many issues you can genuinely care about. I don't have an answer for that.

But what we *cannot do* is pretend that Christianity is anything other than a way of living that involves sacrifice and serving and giving and dying to self.

As the gospel of Mark so vividly illustrates in a unique flashback, Jesus sends us into a cold world in the shadow of John's beheading, in the shadow of his execution on the cross. Our going

out may include traditional acts of ministry. But it may also include speaking up to authority. As John did.

Along with the 12 to 15 daily emails I get on specific issues, I recently received a blog by North Carolina pastor and writer John Pavlovitz. He writes that we are at a critical juncture in our national civic life, and we need “to pick a hill worth dying on.”

“We need to speak and write and work and protest, and do all the things we’ve been waiting for someone else to do,” he says.

When we do that, when we speak out for the voiceless and the unpopular and the needy, there will be costs. As Pavlovitz puts it, there may be friction in our families, damage to our careers, alienation from our neighbors, pushback from churches who don’t see hurt people as part of our gospel imperative.

He calls it the price of liberty.

I call it something else -- the cost of discipleship.

The cost of following our Lord.

Amen.