

**A Sermon by Rev. Martha Shiverick**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**July 12, 2009**  
**“When Copping Out Becomes a Sin”**  
**Text: Mark 6:14-29**

This morning’s lectionary reading is from the Gospel of Mark. It is a text that is in all three Gospels which usually points to its importance in the Gospel story. We need to read it knowing that there is indeed a message for us to hear. What is unusual about the text in Mark is that Mark is usually the briefest in its narrative but in this instance of the telling of the death of John the Baptist, Mark goes into the most detail as to the circumstances of John’s death. Normally Mark runs through the narrative at break neck speed, but here he pauses to tell a story in detail.

Listen now for the Word of the Lord as it is written in the Gospel of Mark 6:14-29....

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Jesus has just sent his twelve disciples out and told them to go into houses two by two telling people to repent and to cast out demons. Jesus’ ministry is taking form, it is beginning to gain momentum and people are beginning to take notice. Knowledge of his parables, teachings, and healings were beginning to be heard of by a wider audience. Even King Herod had heard of Jesus’ name and all that was being said about him. What we have here this morning is Herod’s reflection of Jesus which brings a flash back into his memory of the beheading of John the Baptist. Herod has heard of Jesus and his work and says, yes, it might be that John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. We are then told the story of the death of John the Baptist. Following the retelling of the flashback, we return to the story of Jesus with the Disciples all coming together again for Jesus feeding the five thousand. The passage is definitely an insert, and it is inserted into every Gospel story. Our job is to decipher why it is inserted into the story and what relevance it has on us today.

The flash back to the death of John the Baptist is a story of which many of you are very familiar. Herod fell in love with his brother’s wife, Herodias, and married her. John spoke his mind on all issues and pronounced the marriage sinful. This angered Herod and his wife Herodias and so Herod

imprisoned John. The Gospel writer points out that Herodias wanted to take it further and kill John the Baptist, but Herod feared him as a person of God and just had him jailed. It is described that Herod thought of him as a righteous and holy man, in other words, he respected him. While in prison, Herod heard John preach quite often, in fact he liked to listen to him and although what he said perplexed and disturbed him.

One imagines Herod going down to John's jail cell and listening to his speeches and pondering what the messages meant. It probably really irked Herod's wife that he spent time listening to the man that felt their marriage was a sin. She most likely thought about how nice it would be to get rid of John the Baptist and the influence he seemed to have of Herod. And, she waited until the opportunity presented itself to do just that.

And it did. Herod had a birthday where all the leaders and people of power were in attendance. Herodias' daughter danced in front of the crowd, which pleased them all. In a magnanimous gesture, Herod said she could have anything she wanted in return for the dancing. She didn't respond immediately but asked her mother who jumped at the chance to get rid of John. He would not refuse the girl in front of his friends. It would make him appear weak and a person who goes back on his word. Especially when it was only for the head of an imprisoned old man. Even though it says that Herod was deeply grieved about killing John, he does it out of social pressure and in a fear of not appearing as a strong man and leader. John is immediately beheaded, his head brought to the girl, who gives it to her mother, who must have sat very smug knowing that she had achieved the goal she wanted. The story ends with John's disciples claiming the body and taking it away for a proper burial.

Even if you had never heard the story before, it must sound familiar to you. The parallels with so many of our Hebrew Scripture stories are too close not to mention. There is female manipulation like Jezebel and dancing before the king for favors and power like the story of Salome. And the violent death of John the Baptist is similar to the passion of Christ, even with the ruler sentencing them to death under pressure from others, not because they wanted to or felt the murder was justified. Jesus' condemnation to death by Pontius Pilate is just like John's condemnation to death by Herod. Both men were impressed by these Jewish leaders and did not want to kill them but they gave into outside pressures and were manipulated by others and to please a crowd. Both did not act on their own will but were manipulated by

others out of their weaknesses. And even the end where the disciples came and collected the body parallels Jesus' disciples doing the same for his body. Because of all these similarities to other Bible stories, Bible scholars question the validity of the actual story. However, even if it is not factual, it is important since it is featured in all three Gospels. There is a message for us in it.

One must first ask why put in the story in at this point in Jesus' ministry and really why put in at all? First, it is a witness to Jesus' growing influence at this point in his ministry. Already people are asking who he is and King Herod knows that he is a great person. So great, in fact, that he might even be John the Baptist come back to life!

We also are to see the parallels to the story of Jesus, as it creates a tension and suspense about what is about to happen to Jesus. John died because his message was difficult to hear. John's out spoken condemnation of Herodias and Herod was what eventually killed him. And Jesus would die for words that threatened other leaders as well. We are alerted to the dangers that lie ahead for Jesus. We also know that throughout history, prophetic voices have become silenced when the powers of others are threatened. There is also a warning and tension to us the reader of the Gospel. We are warned that following this man Jesus could have serious consequences. It could lead to death. There is indeed a message that being a faithful witness may make a person a victim.

But the message that I find in this passage which intrigues me is in the emotions and actions of Herod and Herodias. Herod might be a generally good guy but he becomes crushed by outside powers. His generally good intentions are changed when he was engulfed by pride, ambition, envy, fear and finally compromise. I am willing to say that Herodias was a scoundrel, and that her daughter might have been a weak pretty dancer who does her mother's wishes without thinking of the consequences. But Herod is complicated. Herod could do better. And Herod, my guess is, is the person in the story to which most of us relate.

Michaela Bruzzese is a contributing writer of Sojourners magazine. She writes that all the characters in this little story are symbolic of all human nature. She writes that Herodias and her daughter are ambitious and greedy at any cost. She is protecting herself against the accusations against her by John the Baptist without any thought of consequences outside her own. But

they certainly can not take the blame alone! Herod would have you think that he was a pawn in their hands unable to do anything differently. Herod might at first come across as oblivious and duplicitous but at the end of the day he did give the orders to have John killed. So, in the end we know that Herod was cowardly and prideful in not standing up for what he knew to be right.

Another commentator on this passage, George Heider who teaches theology at Valparaiso University in Indiana, writes in the Christian Century magazine, that the best witness against Herod is Herod himself. Herod admits that he thinks that Jesus is John reincarnated and then flashes back John's beheading. Herod must have been haunted by his role in John's death as he recounts how he accommodated his wife's anger at John the Baptist by arresting him and then while imprisoned, he enjoyed and was challenged by his teachings. Herod respected John even though he found his teachings to be disturbing. Then Herod had John killed and his excuse is that he could not do otherwise. He copped out of making a hard decision, of doing an unpopular thing by saying that if we had been in his shoes, we would have done the same. He excuses himself by saying that we who judge him just don't understand. But we do understand and that is why we question his guilt as well. Why didn't he stand up to his wife? Why couldn't he say I won't kill a man I admire even if I have to take back my offer of giving the daughter anything? Why didn't he say something about that fact it was evil of Herodias to want John dead?

So this convenient conscience that Herod had was his sin and if we are honest with ourselves we know that we too have made many concessions to what we believe for convenience or to save face. We might not have put someone to death for reasons of social convenience as Herod did, but we have allowed things to happen by not sticking up for what we believe or know what is right. Dr. Heider uses the example of something that happened in his childhood when he did not say a grace with the other children at lunchtime at school when they asked him to because he did not want to be ridiculed by the other children, but, to me that seems pretty tame. I can think of many more hurtful situations I have allowed to happen by being a Herod and not rising to an occasion when hurtful activities are going on. Sometimes copping out and not doing something is just as hurtful as being actively engaged in it. Just think of language and the power of jokes! Haven't you been in the position that I have where someone is saying a sexist or racist joke and you know you should tell them to stop and that you

do not find jokes like that one bit funny. And then you don't... You sit there and let the joke hang in the air, knowing that by not saying how you really feel, you have given the person license to tell the joke again. On NPR last week there was a discussion on a new slang term used by children as young as elementary school. When they find something lame or want a good put down, they call it "gay". You know the phrase, "Oh, That's so gay." By allowing children to use this phrase the commentator was saying we are allowing negative stereotyping to continue. Even when they questioned the kids and asked them if it meant the person or thing was a homosexual and they said, no, it has nothing to do with sexuality it just means it isn't cool, by equating something bad with gay, a negative connotation against gay people takes place. So, the radio commentator said that by allowing children to use the phrase, we are participating in this negative stereotyping. I know that I participate in copping out on a lot of other issues that are important to me and all of us here can think of behaviors that we have done or just failed to do which promote things contrary to what we hold near, dear, and sacred. When we do this, we are committing Herod's sin of copping out as well.

Being a follower of Christ is not always meant to be a comfortable situation. It isn't enough to just believe but we must also act out our belief and live in a manner that fits our faith. So this message for us today is that as Christians who follow a God who died for us, we can not have a convenient conscious or a faith that is only turned on for Sunday morning. We are to live by an ethic that transforms us, a living faith that pours into all that we do knowing that our God is a loving and forgiving God that keeps on offering us these high standards and goals to which we try and achieve. We have been called to live, to act, and to speak in a way that shows God's love to all creation. Amen.