

Mark 6:14-29 (NRSV)

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.

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

When Herod heard about Jesus, he knew who Jesus was, right away, without a moment's thought. He was wrong, of course, but nonetheless, he knew right away who it was. I'm sure he said to himself, "It's John, I just know it's John." Why do you think he thought that?

For Herod, Jesus is the other shoe dropping. Jesus is the chickens coming home to roost. Herod knows he treated John unjustly and horribly badly and in his heart he always expected he would pay, and Herod thinks the bill has just come due. Herod is haunted by the memory of John.

Now, old Herod has an excuse. John had made his wife, Herodias angry, by speaking out against her for leaving her husband, Herod's brother, and marrying Herod. Though the Gospel passage doesn't say it, Herod has also left his wife, a princess he married as a political alliance to cement a relationship with her father, Aretas IV of Nabatea. So, Herod has John arrested, but he also keeps him safe while in jail, because even though John confuses and worries Herod, Herod likes to listen to him. Nonetheless, when Herodias' daughter dances for him and he makes a drunken promise to give her whatever she wants, and he makes this promise in front of his generals and court nobles and big-time friends, he's stuck with an answer he didn't want to hear – "Give me the head of John the Baptizer."

Now, Herod is a powerful man, perhaps the most powerful man in this area of the world. He is, after all, the Tetrarch, appointed by Rome to guard the Empire's eastern flank. But, at the same time, he's a weak man – at the mercy of his wife and his daughter and his high-powered friends. This seems like one of the central contradictions of human power – those who have human power have it only when and only if they don't use it. Once they use their power to go against the common wisdom, to go against

the popular tide or their powerful backers, all of a sudden they, and we, realize how little power they really have.

John has no similar difficulties. His power, his authority comes from the Word of God. He calls 'em as he sees 'em. If Herodias or Herod has broken the law of God, John will let them hear about it. John, after all, is not accountable to the generals and the nobles and Herod's big time friends – John is accountable to God.

Consider the contrast. Herod is dressed in all his finery, Herod is having rich and powerful friends to a fancy dinner with dancers and entertainment. John is wearing animal skins and eating locusts and wild honey, his eyes are blazing, his hair is going in all directions. And who is afraid of whom? Herod is afraid of John. Because John is free, free as only a man or woman or child is free who is at peace with God, who is aligned with God's purposes. So, for a variety of reasons – a drunken promise, to keep his honor among his guests, to please his wife, or maybe because he is afraid, Herod has John beheaded.

Now, we know Herod isn't happy about this particular conquest. He knows that he has done wrong, that he has offended God, that he has killed a righteous man for a bad reason or maybe a bunch of bad reasons. In any case, he is left with an unease, a sense that this isn't over yet. Uneasy, they say, lies the head that holds the crown.

So, when Jesus comes, you can imagine the cold feeling that grips Herod's heart, that makes his throat close up and makes him begin to sweat. Herod, the powerful man who commands armies, who executes troublemakers, who does what he pleases as long as it doesn't go against what the powerful people want, Herod the tetrarch has already done all that he can do to John. And John's back. Back to settle up.

Now, because we know the ending of this story, we know that Herod and his cronies will do to Jesus what they did to John – they will execute him. For fear or to keep their powerful friends happy, for any number of reasons, they will execute the Son of God.

And so it would seem that powerful Herod has won out over John and Jesus – after all, they are dead and he is not, at least for a while. And one lesson is that death stalks the prophets, that those who stand against injustice and oppression will not have lives that will look very successful to our eyes.

The successful ones will look like Herod and his friends. But the fear, the fear just won't go away. Herod is still afraid. Herod and his friends will always be afraid. They are afraid of their subjects, they are afraid of each other, and they are afraid of God. So they will always be looking over their shoulders for the next troublemaker, the next revolutionary or prophet, the next John, the next Jesus. There's an ironic piece of this whole story – when Herod is defeated and deposed, it will be at the hands of Aretas IV, king of Nabatea and the father of Herod's first bride who he left in order to be with Herodias. So the chickens did come back to roost after all.

In the end, the death rate is what it has always been – 100%. John dies, Jesus dies, Herod dies. We all will die. But before that happens, what kind of life do you want to live? A life that is dominated by fear? Fear of the next prophet or righteous person. Fear of a God whom you have wronged and ignored? Fear of people you have treated badly, you have left in poverty or illness, people you were too busy to care about.

The last couple of weeks we have been talking a bit about fear – the disciples afraid on the sea of Galilee, the woman who bled afraid that she might be punished for stealing a blessing,

Jairus afraid to rely on Jesus to heal his daughter, and now Herod afraid of Jesus who he thinks is John, back from the dead.

All of these stories ask us to reflect on our fears. Because our fears make us do foolish things. Fear made Herod kill John. Fear made Herod participate in killing Jesus. Fear often makes us lash out with violence and murder. And our violence and murder lead us to fear judgment – like Herod, we are haunted by our fear of being judged for our fear-induced violence, and the cycle continues to beget itself, fear leads to violence leads to fear.

I confess I'm very concerned about how much fear dominates our public discourse. Whether our fears are of terrorists or global warming or running out of oil or economic disaster, we are not at our best when we are fearful. We leap to conclusions, we resort to violence, we seek closure too quickly, we blind ourselves to the humanity of those we are afraid of. Fear kills our creativity, deadens our hope and lessens our resolve. Fear makes everything we fear more likely to happen.

We have a choice. We can live in fear, haunted as Herod was haunted. Or we can live in the freedom that Christ offers. I don't think we fully appreciate this freedom – speaking for myself, I know that I don't. This is the freedom of a life centered in Christ, free from having to follow every whim of fashion, free from having to please your friends by doing every stupid thing they do, free from having to agree with things you know are foolish and wrong. Luther talks about the freedom of the Christian this way: “A Christian is the most free lord of all, and subject to none, a Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one.” And so we are – if you're like me, you hear the latter part of this, subject to every one, more clearly than you do the earlier part, subject to none, none but Christ. But both parts are true.

The heart of the Gospel is that we are loved by an awesome God, a God who cares for us and walks with us no matter what we do, a God who is loyal to us the way no one else is or can be. A God who tells us not to be afraid. Let the Herods of the world do the worrying. We have better things to do.

Amen.