

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Good grief! What a story!

Jesus has just finished giving the disciples directions for the mission they're about to undertake. He's told them to equip themselves with faith, to rely on the charity and good will of those who receive them, and given them permission to walk away from the folks who reject them. In Mark's continuing story about the life and earthly ministry of Jesus, today we expect to hear more about how these twelve men fared on their mission. But instead, Mark hits us with a gory story about the beheading of John the Baptist at the hands of the current King Herod. This story is present in all three synoptic gospels, and in Mark's gospel it's the only story of any length that is not about Jesus. So *we* had better pay attention.

We've been through five chapters of this Gospel since we last heard about Jesus' cousin John. After John baptized Jesus in the waters of the Jordan River, Jesus went to the wilderness. Mark immediately tells us "after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God..." There are no details about why John was arrested, and we hear nothing further from Mark about John the Baptist until today's lesson: "Upon hearing about Jesus, Herod said "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

Accounts of the political situation of the day, some biblical versions and others from ancient historians, tell us that John and Herod were cross-ways with one another. This situation with Herodias was just one of the ways they didn't see eye to eye. John disapproved of the marriage—and his disapproval was open and public—because Herodias had been married to Herod's brother. John accused Herod and Herodias of "living in sin." That infuriated Herodias so she convinced Herod to throw John into jail.

That puts Herod in the middle of two people who have the power to make his life miserable and he fears both of them. He wants to keep peace in his household, which means he needs to keep his wife happy. And John...well John has quite a following. He's popular with the people and for that reason whatever Herod does to him will surely bring repercussions. To complicate matters, Herod is fascinated by John. Mark tells us Herod knows John is righteous and holy. And besides, Herod likes to listen to him. So Herod just lets him sit in jail for a while. But the birthday celebration brings things to a head.

There are cultural implications that affect every aspect of this story. The ruling moral principles of the day are honor and shame. Remember, honor is a limited good. John's honor is growing and that means someone else's honor is declining. In this case it is King Herod, whose wife recognizes that this whole business with John the Baptist can do significant damage to her husband and to his political wellbeing.

The dance of Herod's daughter adds to this imbalance between honor and shame. We make some educated, well-intentioned assumptions about both the dancer and the dance. We know that in those days, dancing could be quite erotic; and usually was done only for extended kin. We assume that Herod's daughter is older and desirable as she dances before Herod and his courtiers and his officers and the leaders of Galilee.

Another supposition is that Herod's daughter is just a young girl, whose cute, innocent dance delights her father's friends. But this girl's age doesn't really matter because she is brought into this adult drama that escalates when Herod offers her whatever she wants. Her wish is his command. She has no idea what to ask for, so she goes to her mother. How could she or Herod guess that her mother would instruct her to ask for John's head?

So what is a king to do? Herod must hang on to his honor, honor that can be kept only if he follows through with his oath to give his daughter whatever she asks. Herod is caught between a rock and hard place, faced with two difficult choices, neither of them satisfactory. But he must make a choice between taking the life of a man who doesn't deserve to die and keeping a promise to his daughter.

Caught between a rock and a hard place. Most of us know that situation all too well. Our collective history is full of examples of times when good people faced difficult choices, none of which was attractive. We most often know the outcome of those decisions when the wrong choice has been made. Times when good people failed to act. Or chose not to. The results have been war, slavery, ethnic cleansing, societal discrimination against people who are different from us—you can add to the list. We hear far less about those occasions when good prevails over evil. I wonder if that's because we all face these difficult situations in our personal lives as well. Situations that place us between a rock and hard place, between unsatisfactory, uncomfortable choices—sometimes leading to the wrong choice.

In our personal lives there have likely been times when we chose not to take sides, times when we should have spoken up but remained silent, or times when we should have remained silent but spoke out instead. Times when we should have acted but didn't. Times when we've been dishonest about who we are and what we believe—dishonest with others or even with ourselves. The problem with this dishonesty is that it leads us to wrong choices that we are left to live with. Choices that have the ability to haunt us, to eat away at our peace and wellbeing, long past any opportunity we might have to correct them. The wrong choices can destroy our honor and fill us with shame and guilt.

Our world is not black and white—it's gray! And so there are also those seemingly less critical choices that put us between the rock and the hard place. They're often so subtle we might not notice. They cause us to speak little white lies. Or to make decisions that don't seem to matter much until we see that our decision has become a pattern or a habit that's hard to change. After a choice has been made once or twice, it becomes easier and easier to make, so that we no longer recognize either the rock or the hard place. And our choices, even the little ones, speak volumes about who we are and what we believe.

When King Herod heard about Jesus, he remarked that "John the Baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." And Jesus' powers and mighty works continued. Not too long after John the Baptist was beheaded, a different King Herod also found himself between a rock and a hard place. This other King Herod also looked favorably upon his captive, our Lord Jesus Christ. Like his counterpart, this King Herod didn't really want to execute his prisoner, but justice was much less important to him than pleasing his people. Like his counterpart, he put his better judgment aside and condemned an innocent man to death. Christ was crucified and the world was forever changed. Thanks be to God, through Christ's death, our own wrong choices are forgiven and we receive the gift of God's grace.

It's that grace that we must call upon when we find ourselves caught between a rock and a hard place. Both the King Herod who decapitated John the Baptist and the King Herod who allowed the crucifixion of Christ had the opportunity to make right and righteous choices. What if they had chosen differently?

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our lives we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.