

Silent Victims  
July 12, 2009  
Mark 6:14-29

The sermon (Silent Victims) was written by Isaac, a Mennonite Pastor, and first preached on July 16, 2006. Though I have altered some portions to make it applicable to my congregation and have included the activity found at the end of the sermon, the majority of the text has remained unchanged.

King Herod heard about Jesus, because he was now well known. Some people said, "He is John the Baptist, who has risen from the dead. That is why he can work these miracles."

Others said, "He is Elijah."

Other people said, "Jesus is a prophet, like the prophets who lived long ago."

When Herod heard this, he said, "I killed John by cutting off his head. Now he has risen from the dead!"

Herod himself had ordered his soldiers to arrest John and put him in prison in order to please his wife, Herodias. She had been the wife of Philip, Herod's brother, but then Herod had married her. John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to be married to your brother's wife." So Herodias hated John and wanted to kill him. But she couldn't, because Herod was afraid of John and protected him. He knew John was a good and holy man. Also, though John's preaching always bothered him, he enjoyed listening to John.

Then the perfect time came for Herodias to cause John's death. On Herod's birthday, he gave a dinner party for the most important government leaders, the commanders of his army, and the most

important people in Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and the people eating with him.

So King Herod said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I will give it to you." He promised her, "Anything you ask for I will give to you—up to half of my kingdom."

The girl went to her mother and asked, "What should I ask for?"

Her mother answered, "Ask for the head of John the Baptist."

At once the girl went back to the king and said to him, "I want the head of John the Baptist right now on a platter."

Although the king was very sad, he had made a promise, and his dinner guests had heard it. So he did not want to refuse what she asked. Immediately the king sent a soldier to bring John's head. The soldier went and cut off John's head in the prison and brought it back on a platter. He gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. When John's followers heard this, they came and got John's body and put it in a tomb.

**This is the Word of God and It can be trusted.**

**Thanks be to God!**

Another absurd murder; another life killed; escalating violence; unceasing suffering. This is the world of this past week just as much as it is the world of Mark's gospel. John the Baptist's beheading wasn't necessarily a unique event during the Roman occupation of

Palestine—and, you could say, it's hard to see how it wouldn't fit in our world today, except that we use more sophisticated methods.

For the sake of the stability of Palestine, Herod and others in the Roman administration had to douse the wild-fires of revolution spreading across the countryside by silencing protesting voices—and sometimes, like in the case of Jesus' cousin, John, the best way to quiet the tongue, to silence a protest, was to cut off a head.

The story of John's beheading is not offered as a simple look into the life of an Empire; that is a means to keep the peace through acts of violence against terrorism. Rather, Mark offers us this murder as an important piece in the story of Jesus. However, Mark doesn't really explain why we should think it's important; Mark doesn't tell us why John's death is significant. He doesn't explain why this bit of information fits in the plot development. Prior to the retelling of John's death and the circumstances that surround it, Mark describes Jesus rejection in his hometown of Nazareth and uses this time to teach the disciples about being called and being sent, "A prophet has little honor in his hometown . . . if you are not welcome, not listened to, quietly withdraw. Don't make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and be on your way." Then, right after the story of John's beheading, Mark returns to

the disciples' adventures as if the past 16 verses—the ones we just heard—didn't even happen. Except that he just spent all that time telling us about it. What is Mark's reason for such an interjection? Why is this detailed story important?

Placing the scripture in context, we find ourselves walking away from the it very curious. So here's the question I think Mark forces us to think about: Is this death important to us? (Repeat) If you want to say yes (I certainly do) then we have to ask a follow up question: How do we make this death significant to us? Mark doesn't do the work for us. He leaves us on our own. How do we give this death significance? How do we make it important for our understanding of the story of Jesus? Let's keep those questions in the back of our minds as we work our way through the text, like the detectives of Law and Order.

We can be sure of one thing: Mark wants to make sure we don't forget John's beheading. In fact, Mark doesn't spend anything close to this much time on any other scene in his gospel, except, of course, the passion of Jesus at the end. When comparing Mark's gospel to the others, commentators will always point out how Mark almost tells the story of Jesus' ministry in fast-forward so he can get to the important part, Jesus' death. Mark has a tendency to speak with a since of

urgency as he progresses through his gospel. The gospel of Mark, as offered by the New King James Bible, leads us to believe that Mark's favorite word is "immediately": "*immediately*, coming up from<sup>[d]</sup> the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove" (1:10), "*immediately* the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness" (1:12), "*Immediately* he arose, took up the bed, and went out in the presence of them all" (2:12), "Then the Pharisees went out and *immediately* plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him." (3:6) I think you get the point. That's the typical flow Mark's gospel. Jesus is the focal character, and Mark wants to get Jesus to Jerusalem quickly so he can start telling us about the passion of Christ.

But, for some strange reason, Mark interrupts the story he's telling; he disturbs his pace; he makes us slow down and shift our attention from Jesus to John, that strange man from the desert. As our eyes try to keep up with Mark's fast-paced story, we get caught on a rough edge. If this were a movie, the cameras would abruptly cut away from the film's leading man and fix our gaze on another character, someone who appeared in the first scene (at the baptism of Jesus), and who we thought has already had his moment of fame.

Surprisingly, we find a newly introduced character in this episode that isn't too interested with Jesus; Herod doesn't give Jesus a second thought. He's too busy worrying about John. Recall the words of verse 16, "*But when Herod heard of this (that is, the news about Jesus' growing popularity), he said, 'I killed John by cutting off his head. Now he has risen from the dead!'*" As we imagine the scene, you can feel the camera zoom in on Herod's wide eyes as he turns his head, and stares off into the distance... as his memory replays a traumatic experience. And then, in a flashback, Mark gives us all the juicy details of Herodias' scheme to have John killed on the night of Herod's birthday party.

There's a banquet; food everywhere. Bottomless glasses of wine. The party lasts well into the night. Then there's a seductive dance and in a drunken stupor, Herod makes an oath that he must keep in order to save face with his important guests. The story ends with John's head on platter, for all the party to see. Herodias finally succeeds in silencing John's protest.

Strangely, silence is all we get from John during the entire ordeal. John's death unfolds without a word from him. No chance to argue his case. His fate is decided in his absence, as he sits in prison. The

passage ends with John's disciples taking the body and laying it to rest in a tomb. Then as abruptly as the story had entered into the gospel, the story of John fades away. And so does Herod.

It is important to take note of Herod's absence from the rest of the gospel. In Mark's account of Jesus' trial and death, Herod does not appear; this differs from the other gospel accounts of Jesus' death. Mark tells us that Jesus is executed by the chief priests and Pilate, not Herod. Since Herod doesn't appear again in the gospel, it is safe to assume that Mark doesn't tell us the story of the death of John the Baptist to warn us about Herod, that is to offer any foreshadowing of Jesus' fate at the hands of Herod. King Herod is not important for the rest of the story and neither is John. So, why does Mark bother to mention to us at all?

Ok, have you been taking notes during our investigation? Are you ready to offer a conjecture, a motive for including this story in the text? Here's what I see as the message of this text. Prepare yourself; this could be a bit profound. Are you at the edge of your seat yet? Are you ready? Here it is: John's death is pointless. Ok, maybe it wasn't the conjecture you expected, but humor me for a moment. John's death is pointless, it's senseless. King Herod cuts off John's head for

no significant reason. He makes a meaningless promise to his step-daughter, and finds himself forced to comply with John's death in order to save face in the eyes of his dinner guests. In essence, the event doesn't really strike us as important to the gospel of Mark, that is in the telling of the story of Jesus.

Isn't that also the case when we hear about deaths and violence around the world? There's been so much death in the news during the past few weeks, and it seems so senseless—somebody killed over a grudge, graves and cemetery records being dishonored and destroyed for profit, countless victims of war, of crime, and of murder every time you turn on the news or open up newspaper. Though we read, see and hear of these events on a daily basis, it's hard to see how the names mean anything to us. Those people don't play a role in the story of our lives, at least we don't live and act like they do. They don't really fit our image of what the world is like; our own simple, sheltered lives. They are senseless. They are accounts of senseless violence producing victims of someone else's madness. That's what Mark gives us in the middle of his story about Jesus—a senseless beheading, the product of a drunken oath.

I can only imagine what many of you might be thinking at this point. Well, before you throw begin to throw stuff at me, give me a chance to bring it all together. I want to return to that question I asked at the beginning: How do we make this death significant to us? We have to ask that question when we consider John's beheading, and when we hear and see the victims of the violence of this world.

For the answer we have look to the end of the story: John's death is significant because Jesus takes into himself the wounds of all victims as he breathes his last on the cross. The story of the passion of Christ is not just for Easter, it is offered as a daily reminder of what was accomplished on Golgotha that first Good Friday. Let's here it again, John's death is significant because Jesus takes into himself the wounds of all victims as he breathes his last on the cross. Jesus' crucifixion gives John's beheading significance, and in turn makes all deaths important. When Mark includes John's beheading in the middle of Jesus' story, even when it doesn't seem to contribute anything to the unfolding drama, Mark wants us to see that every senseless death finds a place in the story of Jesus. The killing belongs in Jesus' story even when we can't figure out why or how, even when we fail at making connections; it's already there. John's beheading shows us

that victims of violence, even when senseless, belong to the story of Jesus.

Mark knows that the story of Jesus must include senseless deaths like John's, because Jesus himself, our savior, our Lord, is the victim of pointless violence. When telling the story of the trial, Mark makes it clear that the enemies of Jesus have no legitimate reason to kill him. Mark turns the trial into a joke; a complete fabrication. If it wasn't so tragic, it would be humorous—a comedy of errors.

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they didn't find any. Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree. Then some stood up and gave false testimony against him: 'We heard him say, "I will destroy this man-made temple and in three days will build another, not made by man.'" Yet even then their testimony did not agree. Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, 'Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?' But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. (Mark 14:55-61)

Not only does Mark display the absurdity of those fabricated reasons for the killing of Jesus, Mark also highlights Jesus' silence

before those who have already decided his fate. The passage I just read ends with Jesus' silence before the chief priests and Sanhedrin. And the next day Jesus gives the same silence to Pilate. (Mark 15:1-5)

You see, there is no legitimate reason why Pilate and all the others should kill him, and so there is no reason Jesus can give to change their minds. So, *Jesus dies in silence*. He is a silent victim like John. Their silence reveals the madness of those who want to kill them. There was no good reason for anyone to kill Jesus; it was absurd, the product of a world drunk on power. Do you hear how John's beheading and Jesus' death are somewhat the same? The two stories resonate. Jesus' trial and death echoes back into the story of John and John's beheading, in all its absurdity, all its senselessness, points us ahead to the death of Jesus. Alas, from the perspective of the cross, we can look back and see the light of Christ through John's death.

God's light, the hope of the gospel, is here, but it's hard to see. Who wants to look at death? Who wants to gaze into the darkness? But that's exactly what Mark makes us do with John's beheading—we have to look death in the eyes, without shifting; because Christ died like that. Once we see how Christ died like that, then we can begin to

learn the mystery of a Savior, a Liberator, the Prince of Peace, our Redeemer who comes to us with open wounds.

Last week we spoke of the Good News. Here again, we see the light of the Good News, in this story, even in the darkness. The cross of Christ calls us into a gospel that doesn't run away from darkness, but asks us to find our suffering Jesus in the victims of our world's violence. Let me say that again, the victims of this world's violence help us re-learn the sufferings of Jesus. Jesus shares in the pain and death of all victims of senseless violence.

We cannot forget the scars of Jesus—it's important to remember that the resurrected Jesus came to his disciples with open wounds and His body still bears the marks of His suffering today. The hope of Christ's everlasting life poured out for the world flows in the blood that came down from the cross, from Jesus' side as the soldiers pierced His body. Jesus bears the marks of death, he takes human suffering into his body, and those marks are not erased, they are not forgotten. His body remembers with scars. His body remembers with scars.

We are this body. That's what the Ephesians passage we read this morning is all about. Ephesians 1:13 states, "*So it is with you. When you heard the true teaching—the Good News about your*

*salvation—you believed in Christ. And in Christ, God put his special mark of ownership on you by giving you the Holy Spirit that he had promised.”*

As the body of Christ we cannot separate our remembrance of Jesus, and his senseless sufferings, from the suffering of all victims of a world. The body of Jesus is linked in the fibers of its very being to the bodies of all silent victims. Each Sunday we are offered a time to remember these silent victims. Each Sunday we hear the words, “This is my body, this is my blood” and we stop to remember our risen savior. But do we really remember? When we turn our gaze into the sufferings of this world, the victims who die in silence, without a voice, we see again the agony of Jesus’ suffering and only then can we truly remember. Jesus’ body remembers with scars, so we too, as the body of Christ, must also remember through our own scars; whether they are collectively shared as a community of faith that has placed its trust in a call from God that brings us together each Sunday or whether they belong to only us as individuals; the pain of unforgiveness, a barrier created by reaction to hurt and pain, or the news of yet another senseless impending death.

We see how our sufferings and the suffering of those around us, even when they appear to be distant or unrelated to our own journey, give us new eyes to look upon our wounded Savior and to carry out his command to remember him. It is more than just bread and juice. Christ command is a call for us to learn from those painful stories, to listen carefully to those silent victims, to learn the absurdity of their deaths and the senselessness of the violence that sent them to their graves. Like John, their senseless deaths are a witness to Christ's death. John's beheading turns us to the cross of Christ; and that cross, in turn, points us to all the death in this world. For Christ shares in those deaths; Christ shares in that pain; Christ shares in those sufferings. The mysteries of the cross continue to flow from each episode of senseless violence.

The message today is quite different from the most recent trend of our Sunday morning services. Usually I try to find some way to call us together as a community of faith; one that both teaches and learns the gift of God's love from one another. To simply offer you a moment of hope and encouragement by reminding you that God love you; He is in control and He never gives up on you. But our gospel text from Mark this morning won't let me leave it at just that. This message is a

call to look outside of ourselves, and toward the victims of our world's senseless violence, a world drunk on power, and find God's broken voice in that suffering. Remember John is not a disciple of Jesus; he is not part of the community that gathered together to follow Jesus; John actually has his own disciples; his own community. So, to turn to John to see how Christ's cross echoes in his story is to turn to a victim who suffers outside of our own community of faith.

The message today isn't a pleasant one. Neither is our Scripture reading from Mark 6 a pleasant story. The scriptures should not be an escape route from pain, suffering, and darkness. Karl Mark once stated that, "**religion is the opiate of the masses.**" Again, Christianity should not be an escape route from the darkness, a drug to kill the pain, to cloud our eyes from disturbing violence. Our mascot shouldn't be the ostrich, who sticks its head in the ground when trouble appears on the horizon.

If our religion is different from the host of others, if our faith is at all unique, part of it has to be that we worship a defenseless, silent victim. Yes, he is resurrected. His wounds, however, are not bandaged, covered over, or hidden from sight. They are open, and they pulse with the blood of all victims throughout history and today.

We can summarize today's message in the words of Blaise Pascal, both a Jesuit and Mathematician of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote, **"The agony of Christ will last until the end of the world; we must not slumber during this agony."**

My question for us this morning is this: *How do we stay awake? How do we resist the temptation to slumber and escape to pleasant dreams when it gets dark outside; when we are faced with existing scars, as well as those which may newly form?*

Activity:

- Have a small table with tea light candles.
- Offer congregants an opportunity during the sermon hymn to come to the front and light a candle . . .
  - In memory of a loved one who suffered a senseless death
  - A loved one who is suffering today; whether it be physical, spiritual or emotional
  - For your own suffering or lasting scars; whether they be physical, spiritual or emotional