

2 Samuel 6: 1-5, 12b-19  
Psalm 24  
Ephesians 1:3-14  
Mark 6: 14-29

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Year B

## A CHOICE

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

In the years before I was ordained, a priest friend who was a good buddy of mine would often send me his sermons midday on Saturday when he was stuck and ask if I had any suggestions. I often did, but remember once saying when I didn't that "Sometimes bad texts happen to good preachers."

Now the laugh's on me.

Because when the first thing that comes to mind the text for a sermon is "Fatal Attraction," the Glen Close movie in which a pet bunny meets the fate of many summer lobsters, I know there's trouble ahead.

Where are Mary and Martha when I need them?

There is utterly no good news in this gruesome story of Jesus' dear friend ending up with his bloody head on a platter at King Herod's dinner party. None whatsoever.

And poor Salome, a young girl forced to dance for a bunch of drunk men. She so pleased the king he said she could have anything she wanted as a reward—even half his kingdom. She panicked, as most girls would who've just been exploited and sexualized, and asks her mother what she should ask for. It's reminiscent of Pilate asking the crowd what he should do with Jesus.

Her mother demands the head of John the Baptist and her daughter carries it into the party on a platter.

But just because there's no good news in this text, that doesn't mean there isn't something to learn and consider.

It's intriguing that Herod was *perplexed*. An odd choice of words for the King whose father you'll remember ordered the slaughter of all male children after Jesus' birth.

Perplexing because Herod's on record for crediting John the Baptist as being “a righteous and holy man” and spent time visiting him in prison and listening to John talk about Jesus. What he can't stand is the truth, when it's directed at him. John tells him that marrying his brother's wife is wrong, incestuous.

The truth is one thing when you're listening to a prophet, quite another when it's about you and a truth you do not want to hear. Ask anyone in recovery about what it took to finally admit they had problem with alcohol.

We gravitate to the biblical stories that inspire us as lives are transformed. We don't think much about the teachings of Jesus that fell on deaf ears. Lives that didn't change.

As theologian and writer Debie Thomas points out, Jesus wanted *followers* and doers, not those who remain passive and only “*hearers*” of good news. She suggests asking ourselves these questions:

Do I care too much about what other people think of me, Do I value my status reputation and popularity more than the truth? Am I so bent on conflict avoidance that I harm others with my passivity? Do I prefer stability and Safety more than transformation? Is my inner life and my outer life misaligned, one always covering for the other...When I choose silence for the sake of convenience whose life become expendable...Whose vulnerability do I depend on and benefit from to keep my own comforts intact?

Ouch. Painfully relatable.

Mark paints a stark alternative to the Kingdom of God that both John the Baptist and Jesus were proclaiming. And as wretched and despicable as Herod is—he can be seen as a tragic figure—because he *knew* what he did was wrong and yet did it anyway. The guilt he felt proof of that, points out Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber who reminds us that when he heard that Jesus was healing the sick and casting out demons he felt John the Baptist must have come back from the grave to torture him.

She points out that Herod was stuck in his own story—unable to grow, move or change who he was. Unlike the Pharisees, prostitutes, tax collectors, demoniacs

and others who're transformed by their encounters with Jesus, Herod remains trapped in his sick and corrupt world where power, lust, and greed reign alongside him. Herod's wife, Herodias, was furious that John, in condemning her marriage, threatening her status in the imperial court. She was looking for a way to kill him. If it meant exploiting and traumatizing her young daughter to do so, well, that was just part of the collateral damage.

We distance ourselves from this story at our peril. Because in the end, it always come down to the choice of who you will be, what you will stand for, and who you will stand up for?

How do you, in your own life, answer the question posed earlier: "Whose vulnerability do I depend on and benefit from to keep my own comforts intact?"

Of the ten largest American cities, Philadelphia is the poorest. (Houston is second.) 2/3rds of the city's poor are Black or Latino. We have the highest rate of child poverty in the nation, and in a relatively small city, the highest incarceration rate of any large jurisdiction in the country.

What could make a difference almost immediately?

Raising the minimum to \$15 an hour would instantly transform thousands of low-wage jobs into middle-wage ones, says William Edward Spriggs, a Howard University economics professor. It's the single most powerful thing the city could do," he argues. Relative to the cost of living, the federal minimum wage was higher in 1968 than it is now.

Choices—made by our leaders and ourselves have led us to this point.

John the Baptist and Jesus stood for the same truths. They asked similar questions about the Kingdom of God and how we should live and were executed for it.

And yet, 2,000 years later, here we are. The Kingdom of God does not feel particularly close at hand to me on most days... and yet....we still crazily persist because if we know one thing, we know that there is no other way and that killing the messenger never kills the message when it's the truth.

The Rev. Canon Marianne Wells Borg, summed it up exquisitely.

Rival kingdoms have been in tension throughout the ages...The power that was in John was in Jesus. The power that was in Jesus is in us. In us, Jesus is raised from the dead. In us, Jesus is risen from the dead. Let us keep him alive. Let us keep him alive in us. Love the world as he did. Do not suffer a failure of nerve. Do not give up. And make Herod tremble.

AMEN