

The Witness of John the Baptist.  
Mark 6:14

Luke 9:18-27

Matthew 19:20-30

Responsive Psalm 116:1-11

Today we are going to continue on here in chapter 6, and we will be picking up where we left off last week at verse 14. Turn with me to Mark chapter 6, verse 14 and we will read to verse 29. Mark here takes an opportunity here after the sending of the 12 on their first apostolic missionary journey to sandwich in the historical account of what had happened to John the Baptist from the time we had last seen him in chapter 1 after the baptism of Jesus.

Throughout the book of Mark there are only 2 times that Mark does not focus on Jesus and his ministry, and both of those times it is about John the Baptist. And as we will see this morning, both of these accounts are a foreshadowing of Jesus' ministry, and his death. When we are first introduced to John here in this book we find him in the wilderness, preaching and proclaiming the messiah to come, baptizing and preaching for the remission of sins. Since we are going to be drawing comparisons here, we should probably just go and read the account in chapter 1:1-15

We see that John was a humble man, who lived simply and whose purpose and focus was on the ministry of the Messiah who was coming. Not unlike what we looked at last week when Jesus send out the apostles, telling them not to bring anything extra, but to rely completely on God to provide for their needs. And as we see from the quotes of the prophets here that John was prophesied to be the one to prepare the way for the messiah. I find it interesting that we see John here, the one crying in the wilderness and people coming to him from all around confessing their sins, and being baptized and all the while he was saying that one comes after him that he is not worthy to even stoop to loosen his sandal strap.

Then we see Jesus arrives, the promised messiah, the ones that prophets have foretold, the one whom John was a witness to and whose ministry was to prepare the way for him, and yet not just a few chapters forward we already see the Pharisee's plotting against Jesus. It amazes me what a stark witness John was, and many were quick to come and listen to his message and believe what he was saying, but when Jesus comes, and John says that he is the one, he is the messiah, how quickly everyone stops listening. Stops believing,

This just goes to show that it does not matter the signs, it does not matter how clear the message of the gospel is presented unless one is granted faith to believe, it seems that the word of God has the effect of angering and embittering those who hear it without faith. We see that in our own society today, the change in rhetoric against Christians in our society. Christianity was at one time at least seen as a positive in the community, even if one did not believe, or thought it a waste of time there was at least a understanding and opinion that Christianity was positive. But look at it now, we have people going into churches with guns with the intent of murder, we are portrayed by the media as some backwoods ignorant hicks who are angry bitter people. And Christianity is being blamed for being a cause of unrest, and violence.

Sounds kind of like the area around Galilee in the time of John the baptist, leading up to Jesus' ministry and death. And I think that is one of the reasons that Mark sandwiches this account here between Jesus sending out the apostles and the record of them returning back. It is to show that this ministry is not one that will always be met with open arms and smiles, but to expect the sinful world to react in anger, and hatred for we are shining a light into the darkness that they love so much.

Another way that John's ministry and death parallels that of Christ is in their execution. Both of them innocent men, both of them martyred by political leaders who were afraid of them but eventually give into their peers. In the case of John Antipas gives in to Herodias, and in Jesus case, Pilate gives into the mob. Both John, and Jesus die silently, as innocent men victims of political intrigue and corruption, just as Isaiah we read this morning says, "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth, he was led as a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep before its shearers is silent he opened not his mouth."

Neither John, nor Jesus appealed to the court, their innocence was known, Pilate said that he found no wrong in Jesus, but he feared the mob that was chanting, Crucify him, Crucify him. So just like in the case of John with Herodias, Jesus' death came at the hands of those plotting against them. And what we see here in this account of the martyr of John, is that Herod Antipas is scared believing that John the Baptist had returned as Jesus to haunt him. As I was studying through this I read through the historical account of Herod Antipas, who he was, and who Herodias was and it shows just exactly why John stood up to him calling him out on this marriage, and why Herodias had it out for John. So I want to read that here because it helps to put this all into perspective.

Here in verse 14, Antipas is referenced to as King Herod, there has in fact been 4 rulers who carried the name Herod in the new Testament. The Herod of this account is Herod Antipas, who was the second of the four rulers, who ruled from the death of his father, Herod the Great in 4 bc until ad 39. His official Title was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, although he popularly enjoyed the title king. Tetrarch was a title given to Herod the Great's Sons who ruled over the four divisions of his kingdom after death. Herod the Great had 10 wives, Antipas being the son of the fourth wife Malthace. Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus, Antipas's half-brother who was murdered by his father Herod. So Herodias was a granddaughter of Herod the Great through his second wife, Mariamne the first, and hence a niece of Herod Antipas.

Antipas is less infamous than his father Herod the Great largely because he was just less able rather than less ruthless. Like his father, Antipas was shrewd, pitiless, and a lover of luxury. He built two cities in Galilee, Tiberias, and Sepphoris. Jesus' reference to Antipas as That Fox in the book of Luke bears a testimony to his cunning and malice. Antipas revealed his avarice when he persuaded Herodias, wife of his half brother Herod Philip, son of Herod the Great's third wife Mariamne the 2<sup>nd</sup> to divorce her husband and marry him. However, in order to marry Herodias, Antipas had to jilt his own wife, the daughter of Aretas, king of Nabatea east of the dead sea. In reprisal Aretas inflicted a crushing defeat on Antipas in AD 36, 3 years later Antipas and Herodias were banished to Gaul by the emperor Caligula.

So we see that this Herod Antipas has a very sorted history, and had John imprisoned because he spoke out against his marriage to Herodias. So now Jesus arriving on the scene, drawing large crowds just as John the baptist did, it is easy to see how this would make him uneasy, and worried that John had returned.

By this time now Jesus name was probably well known, not only in the area that he started his ministry around the sea of Galilee but now that his disciples have gone out and further spread the message that Jesus the Messiah had come, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe. We can see that many people were coming up with their own theories as to who this Jesus was. Herod Antipas believed it to be John the baptist, yet others said it was the prophet Elijah returning, or he was another prophet who had come.

So once again, even despite all the evidences laid before them, the unbelieving mind attempts to excuse it away. Jesus was not believed to be the Messiah in the popular opinion of the Israelites, but with all that he had been doing and with the authority of his teaching they believed that he had to be a prophet that ranked up with some of the greatest figures in their history. This reminds us that just holding a high opinion of Jesus, and who he is, is not the same as having faith in him. Considering him to be Elijah, or one of the prophets does not bring anyone any closer to faith. And we hear the same type of things today, Jesus is considered to have been a great teacher, a moral leader for us to follow, one who stands for the weak, one who feeds the poor and hungry, and while all of that is true, believing in all of that does not bring you any closer to saving faith. Jesus was not just a great teacher, a prophet, or a champion for the oppressed. He is the messiah, the king of kings, and lord of lords who came in the flesh to be our atonement for sin, how hope in hopelessness, and our light in the darkness of this world.

Having a high opinion of Jesus as a man, but not accepting Jesus as the Son of God, as the Messiah may in fact have a dangerous effect on your life. Mark has shown that being familiar with Jesus, even being one of his earthly family members is of no real advantage and in fact may be a hinderance as we saw at the beginning of this chapter when he returned to his home town and was rejected. It is ironic that we see here that Antipas actually held a higher opinion of Jesus than Jesus' own in Nazareth. They likened him and hinted at him being an illegitimate son, but Herod Antipas likens him to John the Baptist, or Elijah, he considers him a person of influence and power not just an illegitimate son of a carpenters wife.

Even here with Antipas we see that it was on the minds of people who had heard about Jesus that he was the successor following behind John, who John identified and said in chapter 1, that one greater than I is coming whose sandal straps I am not worthy to loose. In chapter 1 we saw in passing that as Jesus' ministry was beginning, John's was ending and there was a mention of him being imprisoned. Here we read exactly what had happened that put him in prison. He criticized Antipas for marrying his brother's wife, something that was forbidden by Jewish law. The Historian Josephus gives an account of John's beheading but has no mention of John's criticism of Herod Antipas, but rather records that Herod Antipas was afraid that John's influence might encourage an uprising. Whether that was a part of it or not does not change the fact that Antipas was afraid of John, as we see in verse 20, which says, that "Herod feared John knowing that he was a just and holy man, and he protected him.

Even when faced with his infidelity, and evil plotting to have his brother's wife as his own, and afraid of his influence among the people he tried to put John away, to silence him. But as we see this angered Herodias for she likely believed that while John was alive their marriage was in jeopardy. What we see here in this story of Herod Antipas, is that his family is divided against itself, and Antipas himself is divided. He can not risk allowing John to remain free, but he can not bring himself to eliminate him either being fascinated by the things that John says but we see in the following verses that his wife was just waiting for her opportunity. Knowing Herod is a fearful man she plots to use his paranoia against him.

Verse 21. “ Then the opportune day came when Herod on his birthday gave a feast for his nobles, the high officers, and the chief men of Galilee. And when Herodias daughter herself came in and danced, and pleased Herod and those who saw with him, the king said to the girl Ask me whatever you want and I will give it to you. He also swore to her, Whatever you ask of me I will give you up to half my kingdom.”

Herodias has her husband right where she wants him, she seems to have little concern about sending her own daughter as entertainment to these men of stature and power. She saw it as her opportunity to force Antipas' hand to eliminate John once and for all. She knew that he would respond in a grand gesture to impress the others around him. There is no record of these other men, other than they were pleased, but they don't need to for their influence upon Herod Antipas is quite obvious. For Herodias they were the leverage she needed to force his hand, and for Antipas they stood as men who he must garnish favor from to ensure his rule and power.

We see that Antipas offers up to half of his kingdom to Herodias daughter, this was likely a grand gesture given in hyperbole to impress his company. For he was the governor over that area which was a Roman territory. He did not have the authority to grant even 1 acre of Roman land to anyone. Not knowing what to ask we read that Salome went back to her mother to find out what she should ask for. This points to Herodias plotting, and using and manipulating her own daughter in her treacherous scheme to eliminate John.

So what can we take away from this tragic story of the martyr of John? First off it is the simple fact that if you stand for truth and righteousness you are likely going to anger people. John confronted Antipas about his scheme to marry his brother's wife and told him it was wrong, a sin, and unlawful. But instead of heeding John's word, he did what he wanted and sought to silence the one who stood in his way. So we should expect no different. The entire bible is full of examples of people who have stood up for the truth of God's word, and have suffered persecution because of it. Even just by living your life as a Christian stands as a witness to those around us, who when confronted by their own sins and desires seeing that we are not on the same page as them we are mocked and ridiculed and made fun of. Let alone if you try to confront someone and give them advice about where you see their life heading and the sins that they are engulfed in.

No matter your intention, or how much out of love for a person you are when you do so, it will probably be received poorly and they will react in anger. But that should not deter us from being a witness, it did not deter John from telling Antipas that he should not marry his brother's wife. John stood for what was right. So John stands here as an example to us of being a faithful witness no matter who we are talking to, and no matter the consequence. But this also stands as a warning to all those who faithfully follow Christ, that this is no easy road, this is probably not going to be your best life now with all of your wants and desires given to you.

That idea is seriously quite appalling if you think it through. This idea that the reason you are suffering, or lacking in your life is because of your lack of faith. I guess that means that John being prisoned and ultimately beheaded must have been because of his lack of faith then? That whole idea is completely absurd and has no biblical basis what so ever. In fact the bible teaches the exact opposite, You do not follow Jesus to gain things in this life, but instead you should gladly lose all things to gain Christ. That was the problem with the rich young ruler who asked what must I do to be saved and Jesus responded telling him to sell all of his things and to follow him, but as we find out the things that he had ended up being more important to him than the eternal life he was asking about.

So in short, and in closing, what we can learn here from John, is that this ministry includes suffering, but we should still be faithful in it for that is our calling. To live, to minister, to be a witness to the one who has saved us from the wrath of God, should we not likewise be warning others? For as we read in Luke this morning, Jesus tells his disciples, "If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."