Mark 6:14-29

14 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.’15But others said, ‘It is Elijah.’ And others said, ‘It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.’16But when Herod heard of it, he said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.’

17 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.18For John had been telling Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.’19And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20for 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.21But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.22When 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.’23And he solemnly swore to her, ‘Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.’24She went out and said to her mother, ‘What should I ask for?’ She replied, ‘The head of John the baptizer.’25Immediately 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.’26The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.27Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s\* head. He went and beheaded him in the prison,28brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.29When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

You just can’t make this stuff up. I feel like today’s passage comes right off of a movie script. The problem is that we’ve come in at the beginning of episode 2, so we need a little background. The first question to be asked: What is “it”? What did King Herod hear of? Answer: that Jesus’ disciples were proclaiming that people should repent, that many demons were being cast out of people, and that the sick were being cured. This was exciting, hopeful news for many. We can easily understand why those who were sick or disabled might be thrilled, but to understand why the call to repent was appealing we need to think outside our twenty-first century American box and see the world the way a first century Palestinian Jew would see it. We tend to think of repentance in personal terms, getting our individual self right with God, but for the first century Jew living in Palestine, you didn’t think of “you” in the singular sense. “You” were a particular people, a community bound together in heritage and tradition and religion. *Everyone* worshipped the same God, went to the same church, celebrated the same holidays, bought food from the same farmers and fishermen. You knew all your neighbors. “You” were a community, and when “you” were called to repent it meant that “you” wanted to bring a fundamental change not only to your personal behavior but to the behavior of the entire culture. If drugs were being sold on your corner, it was your problem. If people were ignoring the needs of the poor and the alien, you had a share of the blame. Individual piety was not an end in itself; rather it was a beginning of a change to the entire community. So those who heard John’s message of repentance weren’t thinking, “Well, I’m a good person; he’s talking about someone else.” They were thinking, “Boy, John is right. Our whole community is going down the tubes. *We* need to repent.” And once you were baptized, you weren’t saying, “Well I’m finished now. I can go home and be assured that *my* soul is saved; everyone else can go you-know-where” No, you were now part of a movement that was working toward reforming the world. You now needed to work to reform the priests or the kings or the generals or the fig merchant who was tipping the scales. You wanted to get everyone on board, everyone to repent, because that was the only way to redeem the nation, to bring back God’s rule, to make the path straight for the Messiah!

And people like Herod could not dismiss this revival as a mere “religious” movement, because religion was politics, and your position depended upon either how well you pleased the people or how well you controlled the people – and that hasn’t changed in thousands of years: John was a popular preacher with a large following – Scripture says that all Jerusalem and those in the countryside were responding to John’s message and coming to John to be baptized. So when news reached Herod’s ear that Jesus’ disciples were out and around, going from village to village preaching a message of repentance and casting out demons and healing the sick, alarms were going off in Herod’s head. A revolution was coming, and Herod would need to beat ‘em or join ‘em. The problem for Herod was that John had *personally* indicted Herod and his wife, so it was difficult to just brush John off. Herod would need to respond to John’s critique either by silencing John or by repenting of his sin and taking corrective action.

It’s interesting how Mark describes Herod Antipas – we must remember that this is not the same Herod who ordered the murder of all the little boys around Bethlehem at Jesus’ birth; that was Herod the Great. Herod Antipas is Herod the Great’s son. Herod the Great is not someone we easily sympathize with. We can hardly imagine ourselves ordering the slaughter of children. Herod the Great is truly a villain. But Herod Antipas is a more tragic character. There are a series of brilliant commercials on television advertising Dish Network. They tell a story that begins with a person with someone waiting for Cable repair or customer service, and a chain of very unfortunate things happen that leads the person down a very tragic road, and he ends up in a roadside ditch, or with his house blowing up, or with a grandson with a dog collar, or having to shave his eyebrows, fake his own death, or re-enacting scenes from Platoon with Charlie Sheen. What makes these commercials funny is that we see how something that starts very small turns into something very tragic, and we are supposed to think, “If only he had switched to Dish Network…” What makes these commercials popular is that the protagonists are people like us who are prone to make those same little mistakes that lead us into Charlie Sheen’s lair. Herod’s story comes across this way; in him we see a person who begins by falling in love with another woman while he is still married, something that could happen or has happened to a lot of people – you could imagine Herod in a Dish Network commercial that would begin, “When you fall in love with your brother’s wife…” and the result of his divorce and remarriage is this strange-looking preacher in the wilderness speaking out against you, and your wife gets upset, and before you know it your daughter is asking for this man’s head on a platter and because you’ve made a promise in front of all these guests you feel obligated to follow through – the commercial might end, “don’t cut off the head of your critic and give it to your daughter.” Of course the sheer horror of this crime makes it far from a laughing matter. This story reminds me more of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, where you have a guy who could have done alright but ends up creating his own downfall. It’s a story where the possibility of redemption is always there but fails to occur. It’s a story also of a conflicted man who is struggling to appease both his conscience and his wife. If Herod Antipas had been a true villain, like in a Western movie, he would have killed John immediately – that’s how you kept power in those days; you just killed the competition, literally, and it didn’t matter if the competition was in your own family; kings and emperors seldom think twice about getting rid of their own brothers or sisters or anyone else who has a chance to take their power. Herod would not have kept John hanging around in his dungeon indefinitely if his only concern was maintaining power. But according to Mark, Herod liked to listen to John. Herod knew right from wrong, and he knew that John the Baptist was a righteous man. One gets the impression that perhaps if Herod had spent more time listening to John the Baptist that perhaps this story would have had a different ending, that Herod might have released John, that Herod himself might have repented and received baptism. *If only he had followed John the Baptist…*he would not have followed through with his daughter’s request to serve his head on a platter.

But repentance is a hard thing for us. For some it never comes – people spend their lives pointing fingers at anyone but themselves and feeling justified in whatever behavior they decide to engage themselves in. For others the will to repent only comes when they hit rock bottom. This is why it can be a very good thing that people reach the end of their rope; they’ve fallen down so far that the only direction they can look is up. They’ve lost everything that ever mattered to them, and all they are left with is God, but had they never faced such a crisis they may never have looked to God.

Repentance is the turn-around, the come-back (literally!), the point where the downward spiral turns to an upward climb. But Herod is someone who falls short of repentance, and thus we see his tragedy of his life. A king who has everything money can buy, who has the power of life and death over the people in his territory, but yet he remains a slave to his own fears; when word of Jesus and his disciples reaches his ears, Herod thinks the John the Baptist has been resurrected! *He’s coming to get me!* This is the classic paranoid delusion. Remember how Lady Macbeth would have nightmares in which the bloodstains on her clothes could not be removed (“Out, damned spot!”)? Herod is haunted by the fear of reprisal for his sin. Some people wonder if there is a hell after we die. I can tell them that there is a hell right here, a hell that people who bear the weight of their sins and refuse to release must endure as long as they insist on living with that weight. They must endure hell as long as they cannot repent.

One thing you may notice in this story is that no one does anything to Herod. There is no outside judgment or retribution; the guy in the white hat doesn’t shoot him down. There’s no angry mob with torches coming to storm the Bastille. John’s disciples come to pick up the body. But Herod is left suffering a pain worse than death. He’s left believing that Jesus has replaced John. Killing John didn’t make the problem go away; it comes back with Jesus. And killing Jesus doesn’t make the problem go away either, because the message then goes out from the disciples. However hard Herod might try, God’s kingdom comes and God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

If you felt a bit like Herod in this story, realize that you were created in God’s image, and unless you consciously take steps to embrace that image, that is unless you repent, you will never find peace of mind. The only one coming to get you is Christ, who, as Paul tells us, is actively drawing all things to himself. There’s no posse, no angry mob, no vigilante or terminator. Only God’s grace made manifest in Christ, inviting all of us to become what we are destined to be. Don’t resist God’s grace.