Sermon for Mark 6: 14-29, Herod and the execution of John the Baptist.

The story of Herod and his execution of John the Baptist occurs between the sending of the disciples in last week’s text and their return in the verses that follow this tragic story of John’s death. The placement of this story has many implications for the ministry of Jesus and the disciples as well.

The story of Herod’s execution of John is a flashback into the past. Herod carried out his evil deed before Jesus began his mission of proclaiming the Good News. The reputation of Jesus scared Herod. He was concerned about any connection between Jesus and John. In the story we see Herod and his misuse of power by making foolish promises to his step daughter which leads to the tragedy of John’s beheading. Herod becomes an example of abuse of power with all of the paranoid thoughts and actions. Yet the story is a fascinating and is known throughout the world. It is indeed full of intrigue on many levels. Herod has immense power but seems to have no power over it. He becomes helpless through the manipulation of others. Those who influence Herod include his powerful community members who were his guests. His family members, including his wife and step daughter, took advantage of him. Due to his inept use of his power, Herod executes John in spite of his admiration and fascination with John as a person and his message. This story is widely known and is the source of movies, operas and paintings.

How do we appropriate this story for our lives? The saga of Herod and John is a strange story. Why do we even include it into our worship? There is no “Good News” of the Gospel anywhere in the events of that birthday party. The message of the text is that power is not moved by the Gospel message. Power does not change in response to the message to repent. Those who have great power want to hold onto it at all costs. The light of the Gospel reveals the intransigence of those who wield power. We are also exposed to our darkest use of power in our lives. We share in the corrupted pursuit of power. The Gospel’s call to repent exposes our resistance to the change in perspective and direction of our lives. Power and the pursuit of power does erode and contaminate us. We are all seduced by the idea that if we had more power or control over those around us, then we would have a better life. If only we could force people to do the right thing, then we could solve the world’s problems. What a slippery path that leads us all to desire to rule or control others. This struggle with power goes all the way back to our ancestors in the Garden who only wanted the power over life.

Now it is time to reflect on the placement of this unusual story in Mark’s Gospel. In the intervening time between Jesus’ sending of the disciples and their return Mark shares a flashback for us to read about Herod’s execution. The goal seems to be that Mark wants us to realize that the world is inhabited by many “Herod’s” who abuse power. We are called to witness and proclaim the Good News to people who resist our message to repent. They do not want to change. Remember that Jesus continued his ministry and proclamation in the face of great opposition. This theme is one of Mark’s great messages about Jesus as God among us. Jesus continued on in his ministry to demonstrate the power of God that opposed the abuses of the mighty ones. Jesus’ death was parallel to the death of John. Pilate refused to use his power
to provide justice to in the trial of Jesus. He gave in to the leaders demands for death. Thus, Pilate was manipulated to misuse his power in a similar fashion that Herod was powerless to act.

In the next section of Mark’s account of Jesus ministry he records the feeding of the 5,000. This miraculous act by Jesus was the demonstration of God’s compassion for those who are powerless. Jesus power to feed these hungry people was a message to the government of Rome. For all of their military and political power they were unable to feed and provide for the well-being of the people.

Jesus came to call the world to repent. This call to repent is a challenge to change our attitude about the use of power. It is a call for action in opposition to the abuses of power in our world. Indeed Jesus gives us a new perspective for our lives.

The call to minister in the face of resistance and opposition is our call today. We proclaim that the power of repentance changes us and the world in which we live. Jesus ministry to tell the truth to power provides us the empowerment to speak and act for the sake of our world.

May we experience the power of God’s in our call to follow him into a world where power is abused.

AMEN