

Only a Little Hope

Wayne Waibel – 07/14/2024

What are we to take away from this little gem in Mark this morning? There is no mention of Jesus in the passage other than concern over His identity. The subject matter is brutal and not at all life affirming.

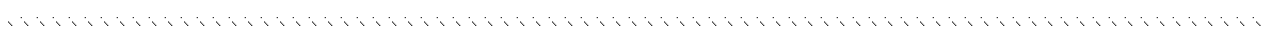
Despite the historical certainty that Herod was a very minor player in first century Palestine, Mark refers to him as King. Additionally, Mark is the only synoptic that goes into any detail surrounding the execution of John the Baptist.

I had a look back at the sermon I crafted in 2018 when this first came up on the rotation – just to see how I handled it six years ago. Not surprisingly, I completely avoided it – choosing instead to pontificate on the lesson from Ephesians. As I recall I asked around, and other clergy at the time — had elected likewise. Sometimes the gospel contains hard to hear good news.

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Mark sandwiches this little morsel between the moment Jesus sends His disciples out into the wider world, and the time they report back to Him. Mark further serves to emphasize this telling by making it a flashback to clarify his almost negligible mention of the Baptist in chapter one, verse fourteen, where he states, "Now after John was put in prison..." So, it is intentional, and undoubtedly included for dramatic effect.

Perhaps it serves to signal the end of innocence for Christ's mission. Clearly it can be understood that Agents of God who challenge those in power usually suffer significant consequences. The great struggle here is truth versus power. And that is a mighty struggle indeed – which continues to this day.



Too often now – and not just in America – that which becomes powerful also passes for truth. It's becoming increasingly difficult to ascertain the truth amid all the hype and fiery rhetoric and tendency to spin everything into that which serves the prevailing agenda.

Sometimes I get the distinct impression that there are a growing number of law-abiding citizens out there that have become so disenchanted with the sheer volumes of rancor that they simply relent and view it all as truth – thereby reducing everything to a minimal value.

When truth becomes a commodity, we all lose, and for better or worse, the lines between right and wrong have become too blurred to be of any validity. We are in a state of content based on exhaustion. Holding on to accountability and honor has become far too great an effort.

And what used to be considered mediocre at best now becomes celebrated as excellence. It's no wonder that those of us who are inclined to look back and strive for some of those qualities that used to define who we were as civilized, caring members of a community are able to garner only a little hope.

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This scene then from Mark must have been intentionally located right where it belongs in the overarching storyline. It does serve as a brilliant reminder of what can happen when you speak truth to power. Even when that power is nothing more than one who felt humiliated and therefore seeks vengeance.

There are plenty of uplifting – life affirming – totally awesome episodes in scripture. We need the dark takes as well so there can be balance. And not all from today's lection is negative. In fact – the shiver that runs through Herod does set in motion a strange kind of understanding that the glory of the Lord will not be denied.

How difficult it is for us, in spite of so many material blessings, to believe that we are beloved. We are reminded again and again of both who we are, and whose we are. We are God's people. As First John reminds us, "We love because God first loved us."

Our affirmation of and allegiance to the truth of the Gospel cannot be a hedge position. We're all in or we're all out. There is an elegance and a grace to that notion. To be absolutely certain of not so much where you fit in God's plan, but that you are actively involved in its execution.

When we listen to the inner stirrings that inform our better self, and discard the trivial and self-serving motivations in order to embrace a more perfect way – we find it takes only a little hope, and we are led to the kingdom of God.

When we listen to the echoes of our ancient ancestors who held the line against those who would exploit the throne and exposed not only the folly of man-made pretenders, but their shallow intentions as well, this fledgling hope becomes a solid pillar.

And we are transformed, because we listen to the quiet and distinct calm that envelopes us whenever and wherever we bow to serve the greater good. Where we encounter our ultimate home in Christ Jesus. Amen.