

“Tales from the Crypt: The Return of John the Baptizer”
Mark 6.14-29

After hearing the gospel reading, one might think today is Halloween or Friday the 13th. Just listening to the reading, I had some flashbacks of several of my old churches that enjoyed telling good scary stories about hell and damnation and the boogie man coming to get you. When I was younger the preacher always told us that we couldn't watch rated R movies. Well, with bible stories like John's head getting chopped off and served on a platter, who needs a Rated R movie? Is today Friday the 13th: The Return of Jason? No, it's Sunday the 12th: The Return of John. Now there aren't many things that scare me in life. I'm a pretty happy guy and I love to smile, but sometimes I want the *bajesus* scared out of me. When that happens, I look at pictures of my mother from the 80's with her big AquaNet hair, blue eye shadow and pink lipstick. (This taste is hereditary so be glad you don't see me in drag!) When those pictures become too much to stand, I like to watch a good horror flick. Classics like Halloween and Jason from Friday the 13th, Freddy Krueger from Nightmare on Elm Street, the Texas Chainsaw Massacre and the Exorcist are all on my favorites list. I love a good scary movie. That may be why today's message from the Gospel of Mark is one of my favorite narratives. If I could place a subtitle on the narrative today, I would entitle it, “Tales from the Crypt: The Return of John the Baptizer.”

The occasion is Herod's birthday and Herod decides to throw a birthday bash for the ages. The attendees of this extravagant banquet are the *crème de la crème* of society: everyone who's anyone in Galilee and Jerusalem – Roman dignitaries, Court officers, and the Temple Authorities. After cocktails and a 5-course meal, Herod invites his daughter to give his guests something special. She rises to the occasion as she dances for these stars in her midst. Not only is it impressive to the guests but it arouses her father so much that he is willing to make her an offer she can't refuse. “Ask me for whatever you want...” he says, “up to half my kingdom.” She could have ice cream, her own pony, her own palace, or a husband even but she instead defers to her mother who convinces her to ask for the head of John.

Now there is a lot to unpack from this text. We could do an 8 week series on this passage if we wanted. We could discuss the ethics of Herod being sexually aroused by a dance performed by his own daughter. We could talk about those at Herod's banquet are those in the top tier of society. We could chat about the portrayal of women in the text who are essentially the scapegoats for Herod. But instead, I want to talk about the fear that has overcome Herod.

The fear in this passage is basically about Herod Antipas dealing with the demons of his past. He thought he solved his problems by killing John but now his fears have come back to haunt him. John was preaching good news and Herod killed him. Now Jesus is on the scene and he's preaching good news. But why is Herod so scared of good news preached by Jesus? As we will soon see, what seems to be good news to some seems to be bad news for Herod and for others. Why is that?

The 8th point of Progressive Christianity reminds us that being a follower of Jesus is costly and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege. For Herod to accept the Good News, he would have to stop being an oppressive ruler, he would have to stop colluding with the corrupt Roman Empire, and he would have to start using his power and privilege to actually help common people, the outcasts and the most vulnerable in society. Good news was right within Herod's reach, but these were things Herod was unwilling to do. He did not want to be a team player in the kingdom of God and he ended up succumbing to his own fears, living in constant paranoia.

How many times do we fail to realize that good news is right within our reach? Sometimes we think that because trying times are with us or because significant life circumstances never seem to leave us in peace,

that God is purposely attacking us and punishing us. We might even feel as if we're God's new enemy. But do we have to feel like we're enemies of God or feel as though our only option is to live in the hellish circumstances of our lives? Is it possible to change our perception and come to a deeper level of consciousness in order to see that what seems to be bad news in our life can also become good news. Why continually live in hell when heaven is within your reach?

C.S. Lewis' book *The Great Divorce*, tells the story of a man on a journey from darkness to reality, from hell to heaven. The book begins by the narrator finding himself at a bus stop in the rain in a grey and shabby town and the only sign of life around is the people who are with him at the bus stop. Well, many of these individuals soon hop on the bus that leads them to a place over a cliff. Over this cliff there are stunning trees and beautiful blades of green grass. The skies begin to turn from grey to blue. It's as if the travelers have come into a paradise known as heaven. When they arrive to this beautiful heaven, the narrator asks a question of a wise man known as the Teacher. The narrator asks if that grey shabby town from which they came was actually hell? And the teacher replies by revealing that the grey shabby town is only hell if one chooses to stay there.

Sometimes a change of perception can change everything. When significant life circumstances come our way, it's easy to give in to fear. It's easy to give in to the hell around us, but what will that accomplish? Based on the law of attraction, it will only cause us to be continually haunted by our fears. I am reminded of the times when as a child, I would throw a temper tantrum and starting crying for no specific reason. After letting me cry for a few minutes, my mother would finally interject saying, "Son, stop crying before I give you something to cry about!" In that same respect, if we keep sowing seeds of fear, the universe will keep giving us circumstances to fret over. Constant worry and pessimism can only do so much for us. If anything, it will only cause us to live in daily fear and what will that help, except maybe exasperate the situation by leading us to unwanted health problems. Anxiety and high blood pressure? With the rising costs of healthcare, no one needs to be falling ill if you can prevent it. Why stay in hell if heaven is right within your reach?

C.S. Lewis wrote, "If we insist on keeping hell, we shall not see heaven, and if we accept heaven, we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of hell."

Once you start expecting good news in all moments of your life and in every good or challenging circumstance, you'll soon realize that a heaven on Earth mindset is much more beneficial than a pessimistic hell on earth mindset. I've noticed that some of the happiest and most heavenly people I know have mechanisms to ensure that good news follows them wherever they go. Every time I call one of our church volunteers, she always answers the phone, "What a beautiful day!" She has trained herself to affirm everyday as a beautiful one. I can almost imagine her going through a hurricane and having no power and still greeting people with, "What a beautiful day!" Another one of our volunteers has one specific phrase just implanted in my brain. When you call her voicemail, she always ends her outgoing message with, "And remember, create a wonderful day!" Sometimes I call her just to hear that voice message and that phrase.

Instead of following the example of Herod and letting our fears always haunt us, let's change our perception and let's not be afraid of some good news in our lives. In fact, let's expect it on a daily basis. In every circumstance, no matter how bad it seems to get, will you expect good news to come your way? No matter how painful the case may be, will you dare to see light ahead? No matter how many obstacles are in your way, will you look for the opportunities in front of you? No matter how many doors slam shut in your face, will you have the fearlessness to not only knock on another, but actually step through the doorway before anything tries to shut it? Will you not only expect good news but actually spread good news to all who need it. If you answer yes to these questions, then you have indeed chosen to leave hell and accept heaven. Thank God, for this is truly good news! Amen.