

Sometimes the scriptures ought to come with a content warning. You see them in news and now in emails - a warning that the information being shared may be disturbing. On television those warnings have long been around - "This show contains scenes that some viewers may find disturbing" - giving the viewer the options of turning off, changing the channel, scrolling past, or deleting the email.

Today's scripture is difficult to hear, but it's important that we don't scroll past or change the channel. Mark recounts this gruesome story for a purpose by continuing his theme that not everyone will want to hear the good news of God's kingdom come, a central message of both John's and Jesus' ministries. Mark lets us know that some will directly oppose that message, and by any means necessary.

We hear that John's life is in the hands of Herod, portrayed here as a weak man, unable to stand up and act for what is right, but a man with some political and personal power. Mark sandwiches Herod's birthday banquet between the mission of the twelve being sent out in pairs to share the good news, extending Jesus' ministry into the surrounding countryside, and their coming back to share with Jesus what they had done in his name. It seems that because of the activity of the twelve, Jesus' name spreads. Herod apparently hears of it and he fears that is it John raised from the dead.

Herod rightly links John with what Jesus is now doing. The activity sounds too similar, too familiar. Told to us in a flashback, Mark reveals the sordid details of what happens to John.

John is imprisoned by Herod because he has challenged and opposed Herod's marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, under Levitical law. It is a marriage more than likely based on expanding political power and gain. Herodias already desires to have John killed, but Herod believes John to be a righteous and holy man, so protects him this far. Yet, John's fate is sealed when, wanting to save face in front of important guests, various dignitaries, and political allies, Herod permits a child's gruesome request to stand and has John's head delivered to her, and then to her mother, on a

platter - a grotesque kind of offering. His disciples courageously come and ask for John's body so they can bury him.

It's a cruel story and one that is all too similar, too familiar to other stories we know - times of injustice where the innocent are slain, times when we would rather scroll past or delete or turn off.

Recently, slain Honduran environmental activist and Indigenous leader of the Lenca people, Berta Caceres' story made news again. Caceres began a "grassroots campaign that successfully pressured the world's largest dam builder to pull out of the Agua Zarca Dam..."¹ She organized opposition to the hydro-electric dam fearing the environmental toll on her community with the loss of a traditional way of life for the Lenca people, cutting off their access to food, water and traditional medicines. Already having faced years of threats to her life, one day while sitting in her home, armed men stormed in and murdered her. The investigation into her death has revealed links to US specially trained forces in Honduras, the Honduran military, as well as to international corporations and international finance. Most recently, a court in Honduras has found a former energy executive, whose company had been awarded the contract to build the dam, guilty of helping plan her murder by hiring the gunmen who burst into her home.²

It's a story that gets told too many times over as people speak up and stand up for what is right and just, capturing opposition from those invested in holding onto their wealth and power. It's a tragedy that reveals itself again and again as bones and memories rise from the past, no longer hidden, here at home and the world over.

We can't help but ask why as injustice still prevails. We should ask it. Why do the innocent suffer at the hands of powerful? When will this promised kingdom come? When will a different story be told?

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berta_C%C3%A1ceres

² BBC News, 5 July 2021

This is when the gospel reminds us that the grisly birthday banquet as recorded by Mark is placed between the disciples being sent out by Jesus and then coming back to Jesus. The movement is important here, this movement of going out and coming back, from Jesus and back to Jesus.

This same Jesus who takes up his ministry after John baptizes him and immediately after John is arrested, this same Jesus who teaches his disciples what it means to follow him and to live by his story. The good news of God's kingdom come near, when those who are sent in Jesus' name learn not send people away to fend for themselves but to feed them instead, to heal the sick of their diseases, to restore the isolated to their families and communities, to expand small notions of tribe and kin, of who is included in God's household, of learning how to move down the ladder instead of up, of being placing themselves last and not first, of sowing the seeds of forgiveness and mercy and how those seeds spread and grow.

This is the ancient account of the good news of God who breathes into the world a people who will know and share that same divine image and presence, a people who will participate in a much larger and more powerful story than any of those of pharaoh or caesar or even herod. John pointed to it and Jesus came to fulfill it. This was what Herod was afraid of because it set people free - free to live in the narrative, the movement and the life of God without fear and without shame.

“What if Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. What if Jesus is not just the shape of God's vulnerability and helplessness (as on Jesus' cross), but also the shape of God's future (as in Jesus' resurrection)? ...In the tomb of that One to whom John bore witness, God will be mysteriously present, plotting not only the resurrection of God's Son, but also the setting straight and re-creation of a whole new world.”³

³ Feasting on the Gospels, Mark, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p. 180

Away on holiday in Cleveland, Ohio, I saw the sign outside the hotel lobby. It had followed me and reminded me of the larger narrative of which I am a part, on holiday or at work, at home or at the grocery store, at the hospital or in the retirement home, with my kids or with complete strangers.

It was a reminder of who we are, this movement of Jesus with him in the world and for the world, and always returning to him. The sign, you've probably seen it as well, read:

Be the Church.
Protect the environment.
Care for the poor.
Forgive often.
Reject racism.
Fight for the powerless.
Share earthly and spiritual resources.
Embrace diversity.
Love God.
Enjoy this life.

Now, being the church will look different in different contexts, yet no matter where it is heard or witnessed or found, it remains good news for a world that is exhausted from injustice, violence and death.

This is our story and I'm sticking to it.

Amen.