

“Why is This Story Included?”

It seems a rather bloody, unnecessarily gory, kind of narrative. Do we really need to hear about the beheading of John the Baptist? When the Plain Dealer has accounts that detail some brutal crime, you can almost guarantee that there will be letters to the editor complaining about the preoccupation with violence. When a TV show is particularly graphic in its presentation of violence and mayhem, there will be sponsors who hear about it — even if they had preceded the show with the disclaimer, *“Viewer discretion is advised.”* But ... movies that reveal gratuitous violence and killing gain huge box office; video games that feature annihilation and bloodshed fly off the shelves.

We seem to live in a culture that both glorifies, and is mortified by, violence. But do we really need to let it into our worship?

Why is this account of the beheading of the Baptist included in the gospel record, and why is it then included also in the lectionary readings for Sunday morning? If the Gospels were intended to be biographies of Jesus, then the answer would be simple — *“It happened, therefore it’s included.”*

Over these past years, I have read five different biographies of Martin Luther — and I must admit that I learned things about the man that I had not previously known (although I think I learned even more about the times in which Luther functioned). Pick up any good biography of any mildly important historical figure and measure its contents — Napoleon (944 pp.), Abraham Lincoln (2,024 pp.), Sachel Paige (416 pp.) — all trying to give every scrap of information that can be gleaned. That’s what biographers do; they comb the record for every piece of minutiae — if it happened, if it’s even suspected of having happened, in it goes! But the Gospels are not biographies.

Back in the ‘70’s, during our Synod’s intertribal bloodletting, one of the words that became very important to the ultraconservatives was the term

“historicity” — they all wanted to know if you believed in “the historicity of the Bible.” For them, that was the primary touchstone for faith. If you believed that Adam and Eve actually existed, that Moses was a “real person,” and that Pontius Pilate was truly a person that lived, then you were “O.K.” Now, I have to admit that some folks, like my “friends” over at the Jesus Seminar, do say stupid things like, “*Pontius Pilate was an invention of the Gospel writers and never existed.*” (Elaine Pagels, scholar from Harvard at the time, came up with that one, later proved to be utterly false by an archeological discovery), so the insistence on affirming a belief in the basic trustworthiness of the Biblical record is not totally out of whack.

But it does rather seem to miss the main point — that main point is not, “*Did it really happen?*” That main point is the title of today’s sermon: “*Why is This Story Included?*” John the Evangelist tells us at the end of his Gospel: “*there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written . . . But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*” (John 21: 25; 20:31)

The Gospel writers were not interested in capturing every detail of Jesus’ life (had that been their goal, we would have to dub them colossal failures) — they were interested in (here comes the technical word) kerygma. They were not interested in passing along just that Jesus lived, did some things, and died a tragic death — they wanted to proclaim Him as Lord, Messiah, Savior. So we have to assume — the goals of kerygma lead us to conclude — that every piece of information in each of the Gospels assists that Gospel writer in making his kerygma as powerfully compelling as he could make it.

Our Gospel writer this morning, as it has been since November, is Mark. Lots of books have been written about Mark’s purpose for writing his Gospel, but the arguments boil down basically to this: Mark probably took stories that he heard from St. Peter, along with Peter’s preaching,

and reshaped it into this narrative form we now call a Gospel (by the way, Mark — along with the Holy Spirit — was probably the inventor of this form of literature). Mark basically included stories about Jesus’ activities in order to get at this fundamental question: “*Who is this man?*” It has been said (in fact, I just said it two weeks ago) that all the Gospels are essentially Passion narratives with introductions — there’s much truth in that. Clearly the events of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection were at the very core of the kerygma, and people did need to come to understand who Jesus was in order to grasp the significance of His death. In Mark especially, this purpose appears to be paramount.

We’ve heard this as we’ve listened to Mark’s Gospel over the past weeks. People are amazed when Jesus does a healing. They are astonished at the power and authority of His preaching and teaching. His disciples witness the stilling of the storm and are driven to their knees with this question on their lips: “*Who is this . . . that even wind and sea obey him?*” Who, indeed!

Now, if Mark is trying to help his readers come to terms with who Jesus is so that they can join with the centurion at the foot of the cross to declare, “*Truly this man was God’s Son!*” then we have to go back to the record to ask “*How does this narrative help to meet that purpose?*”

Some people would think the focus should be on Herod. Ask any actor or actress, and they will agree — villains are the most fun to portray. A good villain brings all the best energy to a play or film. Dudley Dooright may win the day and Sweet Nell, but it’s Snidely Whiplash who carries the action. I was told my Sophomore year in college that I was being typecast; I was in three plays that year: I played a drunken murderer in Tennessee Williams’ Summer and Smoke, then a Nazi in The Sound of Music, and finally the Devil in Archibald MacLeish’s J.B. (a retelling of the story of Job).

So in this drama, Herod is (as the police often say) “a person of interest.” This Herod (because there are several in the annals of Judaism and the New Testament) is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great (the king

who slaughtered all the children in Bethlehem). He was an Idumean, not Jewish (and therefore regarded as an interloper by the strictest of Jews), and a close ally with the Roman occupiers; Herod was reviled and feared by his subjects. This account of the beheading of the Baptist does justice to the other portraits we have of Herod in the writings of Heroditus and Josephus, the two great Jewish historians.

I suppose it is true that we can learn from the Herod shown in this account (a small sampling from commentators): *“Bad choices do not usually lead to good choices — but to more bad choices”* (John Jewell). *“Most human decisions are made in the glands and not by the brain”* (John Powell). *“. . . our choice is not between good and evil but evil and more evil. Not moral and immoral but immoral and more immoral”* (Chris Hedges). There’s truth in all of them . . . helpful truths, to boot. Herod does seem to be governed — first by lust, then by fear — but not by intelligence or faith.

But the focus is not on Herod (at least it should not be). The focus is on the Baptist and ultimately on Jesus. That focus comes because Mark is building his case, and part of that case involves the rumors that have reached Herod’s ears — rumors like ***“John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him [i.e. Jesus].”***

Herod is hearing about Jesus’ powers. . . powers like stilling a storm; powers like healing the sick and injured; powers like speaking with an authority heretofore unknown. People are saying that Jesus has these powers because He is really the Baptist resurrected. Which is rather interesting, because John the Baptist, at least in the Gospel records, did not do works of power (miracles). So why would there be rumors of John’s miracles now done in Jesus?

The power that people are seeing in John and in Jesus is the power of connectedness to God.

You can observe something and be spot on in your description of what

is happening and still be miles off in explaining why it is going on. For example: Your spouse comes in the house grumpy and out of sorts (that never happens in our household, just ask Kristine, but maybe it does in yours) and you say to yourself — *“She is angry at me”* (if you are either paranoid or feeling guilty, or both). *“She had a bad day at work.”* *“She had an encounter on the drive home.”* *“That’s just the way she is”* (you’ve seen this before). Your observation is on target — *“My spouse is upset.”* The only way you are going to know why is to be stupid (all of your guesses were way too smart, get stupid . . . ask!)

The rumormongers that Herod listens to obviously are seeing in Jesus the dimension of His intimacy with the Father. They saw something akin in the Baptizer . . . they make a connection. But the connection is not outward miracles, it is inner strength that comes from knowing that what you are doing is from God. This Jesus and John had in common: neither man would shut up and neither would back away from the mission for which God had sent him. Herod comes into the picture solely as the foil — the comparison that provides the opposite point of view.

Catherine Taylor, a pastor in Blacksburg, Virginia, writes: *“We need this awful story to help us ask if we are following the One whose way was full of danger and whose final destination was a cross. We might be more like Herod than we think, attracted to the holy but not changed much by the association. If nothing else, this disturbing story reminds us that it's terribly easy to dis-member our faith in order to look good in front of our peers, or at least not risk standing out. By the same token, we decapitate what we say we believe in when we compartmentalize it into a Sunday ritual that has little or nothing to do with the rest of our lives.”* Now we’re getting a little closer. Herod is easily put off from what he knows is God’s way.

Someone else expressed it this way: *“. . . for many people, God is like an insurance agent. Most of us don't communicate with our insurance agents on a regular basis. We don't have coffee with them or have them over for dinner. Hardly anyone I know has vacationed with their*

insurance agent. But — when trouble strikes or disaster happens, we frantically wonder where we put our agent's phone number! The problem is that this 'insurance agent' approach to God blocks the blessings of God in our lives. There is no such thing as a 'part time God' or a 'God of convenience' in the Bible. The gospel lesson today is a very powerful example of barriers to God's blessings in our lives. It is an extreme example to be sure, but it does show what happens when something other than God dominates one's priorities."

Why is this story included?

First, to bring to light the nature of real connectedness to God — a connection that we dare not release and will not release us — from which flows the power we need to act as God's people.

Second, to enable us to see that this connection will inevitably involve us in pain — maybe not beheading like John or crucifixion like our Lord, but pain that can be costly. Those who think the Christian commitment is to find only sunny days, glorious sunsets, and happily-ever-afters will be sadly (and tragically) disappointed.

Third, when there is that connection to God, there is a flow-through; God's power goes to work. Again, it may not be to the extent and magnitude we see in Jesus, but it will be what needs to be there for the moment into which God places you.

This horrid story of the beheading of John the Baptist cannot be viewed as simply an historical sidetrip as we journey with Jesus. It tells that the journey with Jesus is fraught with difficulties, pain, sorrow, even death. But it reminds us yet again that, no matter what we confront in life, God is in it with us, His power is at work in us, and that — no matter what happens — because we are connected to God, it, and we, will be all right.

Amen.