

“Broken Promises”

Sermon – July 14, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

Publilius Syrus, a Latin writer in first century before Christ, coined the aphorism (among many others), “Never promise more than you can perform.” From today’s gospel lesson I guess Herod Antipas [ANT-ah-pass], despite studying in Rome, never read Publilius Syrus.

Today’s story from Mark 6 is unique in a couple of respects.

Aside from the empty tomb the women discover, it is the only story in Mark where Jesus never appears. In fact, the story is told as a flashback with Jesus mentioned only in the beginning as a reference to John the Baptizer.

Also, compared to the other gospels, Mark paints Herod Antipas less as an arch villain and more as feckless and self-absorbed. Here Antipas *likes* listening to John, though is perplexed by what he says. And he *protects* him out of fear that “[John] was a righteous and holy man.”

In this story it is Antipas’s wife, Heroidas, who is portrayed as more the calculating, angry villain. She is the one that got Antipas to imprison John because John was criticizing their marriage as unlawful and immoral.

As has been true throughout the ages, marriages, particularly for royalty, have been for politics and power. In this case, Herod the Great, the king when Jesus was born, divided his kingdom upon his death in 4 BCE to three of his sons—half brothers to one another.

Herod Antipas was to rule Galilee and the east bank of the Jordan as a tetrarch; Philip was to be tetrarch of the Golan heights in the north-east; and Archelaus became the ethnarch of Samaria and Judaea. Tetrarchs and ethnarchs were rulers below the level of a king—something each of them wanted to be and fought about.

“Broken Promises”

Sermon – July 14, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

Now Herodias was the wife either of Philip, according to Mark, or, according to other sources, Herod II, another son of Herod the Great, who has fallen out of favor of his father. She herself was the daughter of another half-brother, Aristobulus. So Herodias was both Herod Antipas’ sister-in-law and niece.

All perfectly clear? Let’s just say the family of Herod did not believe in much genetic diversity.

So when Herod Antipas became ruler of Galilee, Herodias saw it as a step up and dumps her current husband and Antipas dumps his wife. But John the Baptizer calls her and Antipas out on it. She seethes about it as it hurts her royal status and prestige.

In Mark’s version Antipas himself is apparently not as concerned, though he does imprison John for it.

Antipas then decides to throw a lavish banquet to impress his “courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.” As part of the entertainment, Antipas has a dancer, but instead of the usual courtesans, he has his daughter, as Mark implies, or his stepdaughter and grand niece as the other gospels indicate.

By the language used she was probably 12 to 14 years-old. And while we have hypersexualized the dance over the centuries, the account simply says she “came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests.”

Perhaps they were lecherous men or perhaps they were simply impressed by the dance—maybe she danced like Jennifer Beals in the movie “Flashdance.”

“Broken Promises”

Sermon – July 14, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

In either case, Antipas makes the foolish promise, “‘Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.’ And he solemnly swore to her, ‘Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.’”

It is foolish on two accounts. One is why would you make an open promise? And second, why would you make a promise that you couldn’t keep, specifically “half of my kingdom”? Antipas was a tetrarch—not a *king*, despite what Mark records. He *ruled* over Galilee but more like a governor; he was appointed and acted on behalf of the emperor. He couldn’t give away half his kingdom even if he wanted to?

And what if he could have given away half his kingdom and she asked for it? Would he have done it? Doubtful. It sounds far more like bombastic rhetoric—something to impress his guests. And perhaps a 12-year-old girl.

Interestingly, she apparently did not have to give an immediate answer, but went to her mother and asked her and she, finally seeing a way to get rid of him once and for all, responded, “The head of John the baptizer.”

The girl rushed backed and said, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist—on a platter.” Why she added the platter part is unclear, but, apparently, she didn’t care too much about John either.

Mark writes, “The king (!) was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.”

Really? He really felt he had to honor a foolish promise and behead a man? And would all of his guests have said, “Well, you said anything, so I guess you have to behead the man. Tough break.”

As a matter of fact, why didn’t any of them try to stop him? Like, “Antipas, you don’t have to do this. It’s a ridiculous request.”

“Broken Promises”

Sermon – July 14, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

And Antipas was “deeply grieved”? Was he saying to himself, “Oh, I liked John and the people liked him. Now I have to go and kill him.”

But, no, “Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.”

So what’s the point of the story? Why does Mark have it and have it here? Why am I discussing such an “uplifting” story in the sermon?

For Mark it probably had two purposes. One was to show the tragic conclusion of John the Baptizer and his movement, just as Jesus and his movement was on the rise. John got things started as a forerunner; Jesus takes it from here.

The other purpose would be to foreshadow Jesus own life. Herod Antipas foreshadows Pilate in the same way that John presages Jesus

The two prefects are nominally in charge. Like Antipas, Pilate is amazed by circumstances surrounding an innocent prisoner, swept up in events that fast spin out of his control, and unable to back down after being publicly outmaneuvered.

Like John, Jesus is passive in his final hours, faces with integrity his moment of truth, and is executed by hideous capital punishment dying to placate those he offends.

Jesus surely saw with John the Baptizer that his fate might be similar—but he did not waver. In fact, maybe he stepped up his game to take place of John. Antipas even says of Jesus at the beginning of today’s story, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

“Broken Promises”

Sermon – July 14, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

Why did I decide to dwell on this story today? To point out that when repentance is preached to this world’s princes, do not expect them to relinquish their power, however conflicted some may be. The righteous die for reasons both valorous and vapid.

Everyone in this story is guilty, except for John, of course,—all because they value power and pride over all else and see others, particularly those below them or a nuisance as just objects, not human beings.

Herodias hates John because she knows he’s right and wants to silence him.

Antipas likes John, like a rich person likes his Lamborghini; he’s just an object. And Antipas has no moral center or integrity. He does what is expedient and saves face.

And all people at the banquet commit sins of omission—they do nothing in face of gross injustice. Or, worse, go along with it agreeing with the rationale.

As the world, secular and religious, seems to be marching into ultra-nationalism and denying the freedom and humanity of people, we are called to be prophets, to speak the word of the Lord, in the face of adversity, having faith in the one who died for us that we might be free.

While we are told we must keep our promises, we cannot let promises made foolishly override the promise we make as followers of Christ to love one another as Christ loved us.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Amen.