

## **“The Good, Bad and the Ugly”**

### **Mark 6:14-29**

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July 16, 2006

It occurred in front of 15,000 people on May 19, 1962 at New York’s Madison Square Garden. Everyone watched as Marilyn Monroe strolled to center stage, picked up a microphone and sang in a sultry, sexy voice, “Happy birthday, Mr. President.”

It was John Kennedy’s forty-fifth birthday and afterward he remarked to the crowd, “I can now retire from politics after having had Happy Birthday sung to me in such a sweet, wholesome way.”

As you recall, there was nothing wholesome about this incident. Marilyn Monroe’s dress was flesh colored with 25,000 rhinestones sewn into it. As a matter of fact, the dress fit so tightly on her that she had to be sewn into it, causing her to be late for her performance. Kennedy’s brother-in-law, Peter Lawford, had to introduce her twice because she was running late. When she appeared on stage, he finally introduced her as the “late Marilyn Monroe.” Ironically, three months later she died. This was her last major public performance.

Can you imagine the tension in the air as Marilyn Monroe sang? I wish I could have watched the expressions of Kennedy’s Cabinet, staff, political operatives and family. They knew this birthday party was about to get out of hand, and if it did, it would cause great embarrassment and political damage to the President.

This was not the first time a birthday party for a high official created uproar. Herod Antipas’ birthday party did get out of hand and become unruly. After watching his stepdaughter dance provocatively, which happened to also be his niece, Herod Antipas promised her anything she wanted as a reward. She consulted with her mother, Herodias, and made an unusual request. She wanted John the Baptist executed.

John the Baptist was a prophet and the forerunner of Jesus. He was a humble, plain spoken and honest man that condemned Herod Antipas for seducing and marrying his brother’s wife, Herodias. So incensed was Herodias that she wanted John killed so that she could sin in peace. When that opportunity came, she seized it.

At this point, the birthday party turned sour for Herod Antipas. He respected John and had protected him on other occasions when his bold proclamations got him in trouble. I imagine they had forged some kind of relationship bordering on friendship. Now Herod faced going back on his word to Salome in front of his military leaders and other associates or ending the life of a holy and righteous man who did nothing more than tell the truth.

So what did Herod Antipas do? He granted Salome’s wish and had John the Baptist executed. The lust for power trumped decency and honor.

There is any number of directions a preacher could go in developing a sermon from this story. Herod provides a lot of material. He killed the only man that told him the truth. I’m not surprised, though. Truth usually meets with resistance when it confronts power.

He was willing to sacrifice an innocent man to maintain his honor, prestige and power. “It would be one thing to commit such a heinous act out of hatred or threat to his rule,” Jerry Goebel writes. “Yet Herod Antipas had John killed because he feared what others would say.” Who among us hasn’t sacrificed a friendship on the altar of self-preservation?

Herod repeatedly appeased people in order to hold on to his place in the world, including his father, Herod the Great, the Roman government, Herodias, his wife and Salome, his niece and step-daughter. Again, I am not surprised. This is normally what selfish people do that are ruled by their appetites and lusts.

I have no doubt that a sermon focused upon Herod would make all of us squirm because Herod lives in all people that know what is right and fail to do it.

At the same time, a powerful sermon could focus upon Herodias and her evil ways. Can you imagine living with a woman that uses her twelve-year-old daughter to manipulate her husband to satisfy a personal grudge? Read the details of the story to find out how this young girl was used in this sordid drama. To be candid with you, they are too harsh to mention in front of children. About all I can say is that I don't know of a better example of the destructive power of bitterness, hatred and revenge.

While this story raises a lot of sermon ideas and topics for discussion, one of the most intriguing for me is its placement in Mark's gospel. Why was it placed immediately after Jesus called, commissioned and sent out his disciples? After all, Mark told his readers in 1:14 that John had been arrested and placed in prison, but gave no reason for it nor mentioned it again until now. What purpose did he have in mind? What message was he sending his readers?

For me it is this. **Mark wanted to remind his readers that in this world, good and evil would always coexist.**

"The Good, the Bad and the Ugly" is the title of a western set during the Civil War. The three main characters (Clint Eastwood, Eli Wallach and Lee Van Cleef) are out to find a buried treasure. Each of them is treacherous and greedy but to varying degrees, hence the reason for the title. Teamwork did not come easily for these three strong-willed outlaws and they discovered their greatest challenge was to stay focused and alive in a country ravaged by war.

I have borrowed the title many times to describe the kind of world in which we live. Life is a mixture of the good, bad and ugly, and no where is this better seen than in today's text. Let me explain.

What occurred prior to Mark's account of John the Baptist's tragic death? Jesus called and commissioned his disciples. He turned them into missionaries, teachers, counselors and physicians that would restore life and wholeness to broken people. Upon their return to him, they excitedly shared the most incredible stories of hope and healing that God produced through them. What a wonderful celebration this must have been. This was life at its best.

Lest his readers think that this was the way it would be for all believers, Mark inserted the story of John the Baptist's death to help them get a complete picture of discipleship. Not everyone would have such great success and be widely accepted as Jesus informed his disciples when he sent them out. Some would face rejection and a violent death as John the Baptist did. This was life at its worst and it could be their lives.

Again, notice the placement of the account of John's death. It was sandwiched between Jesus sending the disciples out and receiving their good reports. The world is a combination of the good, bad and ugly and this was Mark's way of reminding his readers.

Like you, I wish there were no evil. Would that we lived in a world that was a mixture of only good, better and best, but we do not. So, what are we to do?

**Don't let the spread of evil cause you to despair and quit doing good deeds.** It certainly did not paralyze Jesus and the twelve. What occurred in Mark's gospel soon after the account of John's death? Jesus fed the crowd of five thousand by multiplying the loaves and fishes.

This was Mark's way of telling his readers that Jesus was neither intimidated by Herod Antipas nor distracted by concern for his own wellbeing, even though he was aware of the dangers and risks. He was, if anything, more inspired and motivated to do God's work.

Evil in its ugliest form tends to cause us to throw our hands in the air and give up. "What's the use?" we cry. "All our efforts are in vain!"

No, they are not. We can make a difference in the world if we remain committed to the cause of Christ to overcome evil. Just ask Baby Noor and her grateful family.

You recall that she was the two-month-old baby discovered last December in Baghdad by soldiers of the Georgia Army National Guard. When Pfc. Justin Donnelly, an Army medic in the unit found the child and examined her, he realized she was suffering from spina bifida,

commonly referred to as “open spine.” Without medical attention, Baby Noor would have lived about a month.

Arrangements were made to have Baby Noor flown to Atlanta where she received six months of treatments, including several surgeries and other medical procedures. On Wednesday, June 28, Baby Noor returned to her loving family. Doctors predict that Baby Noor will have a chance at a fairly normal life.

We can make a difference in the world if we don't grow weary in well doing. We must not let the constant threat of violence cause us to retreat or miss opportunities to help others. I know there is a tendency on the part of every person, even believers, to take care of themselves and their families and let their neighbors fend for themselves. We must not do this. For the cause of Christ and the sake of mankind, we must not abandon our mission to make the world better.

Evidently Jesus believed this could be done because his focus was not upon what happened to John the Baptist, but what he and others could do to continue the work the faithful prophet began. As devastating as John the Baptist's death was, it would have become a tragedy if Jesus and his followers had walked away from the mission and gone back to fishing and building houses.

I think understanding the strategic placement of this story in Mark's gospel unlocks the key to its meaning and significance. For me, this story is an encouragement to remain committed to the cause of Christ even when evil is rampant and the challenge is dangerous. There is too much at stake to give up and quit.

Reverend Joanna Adams sums it up like this, “It would take more than a decapitation to stop the truth of God, crucifixion to stop the Son of God and persecution to stop the mission of God.” Amen! May we be that committed to the cause of Christ in a broken world.

Lorraine Murray's recent article, “Cheer for Everyday Heroes,” reinforces our need to be faithful. Referring to “Superman Returns,” she writes, “It's fun to go to movies and watch larger-than-life figures like Superman saving people. But if you take a close look around in your own world, I think you will spy plenty of heroes of your own. They can't bend steel or leap over tall buildings, but they are still, in their own quiet ways, tipping the balance of good over evil. They are quiet reminders of God's mercy and goodness. And today, more than ever, we need them.”

Yes, we do Lorraine, and thanks for reminding us.