



Saint John the Baptist Episcopal Church
The Rev. Michael Carroccino, Priest-in-charge

Rev. Carroccino's sermon for Sunday, July 12, 2015 – The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Amos 7:7-15 ▪ Psalm 85:8-13 ▪ Ephesians 1:3-14 ▪ Mark 6:14-29

John the Baptist

When you come across a picture of a severed head on a platter, you can pretty much guarantee that you're looking at John the Baptist - this is his signature image, not just instantly recognizable but unmistakable. The story of his death is memorably gruesome and seemingly meaningless: almost as though he lost his head simply for being mixed up in a marital dispute between a king and queen. In its mindless familiarity, even the idea of Jesus nailed to a wooden beam to die fails to conjure up the sort of visceral response you and I have when we imagine this disembodied head paraded into Herod's banquet hall. This image, in a nutshell, is John the Baptist, but don't worry - tempting as it is - I'm not going to put it on my business card. Well, not yet anyway.

John's ignoble death seems to almost a rabbit trail in Mark's gospel, a sort of lurid distraction amid the stories of mercy and healing that characterize Jesus' ministry. Why is this here? In a gospel known for its short, fast-moving narrative, this story's complex timeline and intricate detail stick out like a sore thumb. John the Baptist only appears in this book one other time - what is the author trying to tell us by devoting so many words to him here?

Over the centuries, scholars have accused Mark's gospel of being poorly written: the narrative is choppy, the stories lack detail, even the Greek in which it is written is inelegant compared to other writing of the time. But in the last generation, a minority voice has begun to come to the fore. Some now see Mark as the most literary of the gospels, with themes that carry throughout and writing that builds intensity and sharpens awareness in its readers. In nearly every story, there are layers of rich meaning, and the characters stand in as representations for complex ideas and concepts. And so with this in mind, I wonder what John the Baptist is telling us in this story.

At first glance, John is not a particularly prominent character in Mark. He appears at the very beginning - just long enough to let us know that someone even greater is coming - and then here in today's reading his life comes to a tragic end. Mark doesn't give us the John who leaps in his mother's belly at the appearance of her pregnant cousin. Nor does Mark's John send word from prison inquiring as to whether this Jesus really IS the one, or should we wait for another? No sending his own disciples to follow Jesus, no teaching about how to live justly with possessions, just baptism and death. Or maybe not.

John manages to wriggle his way into this story at key points, and yet remain unnoticed. The key here is his association with Elijah. The prophet Elijah is a central figure in the Hebrew Scripture, a kind of spiritual super-hero for the Israelites. Whenever evil-doers triumph, Elijah will set things straight. Raising the dead? Slaughtering rival prophets? All in a day's work. In the first-century setting of the gospels, invoking Elijah adds credibility and power to your story. And Mark is suffused with references: even today's story about Herod is an almost direct parallel to Elijah's conflict with Ahab and Jezebel in 1 Kings. Elijah and his super-friend Moses are there when Jesus is transfigured, and Elijah's name crops up one more time just as Jesus is dying on the cross. Mark wants to be sure we understand that John the Baptist is synonymous with Elijah, because he has a statement to make, a statement that would have been scandalous if he said it outright.

John symbolizes something else as well: the people. Mark tells us that the whole Judean countryside and all of Jerusalem were trekking into the wilderness to hear John preach. He was wildly popular, so when Herod imprisons him we are to understand that Herod is in effect restraining the whole of Judea. John's criticism of Herod's marriage is in effect a questioning of his right to rule the people. When John's head appears in Herod's banquet, it represents Herod's treatment of all the people: his carelessness results in their suffering and death. Mark is saying in his subtle way that Herod, or any king with such qualities, cannot carry the title King of the Jews. And so Mark uses this story to critique unjust monarchy and political structure: a dangerous undertaking in almost any time and place.

But the Elijah connection is more shocking and dangerous still, one that even today has the power to upend our faith. John's encounter with the royal family is almost identical to Elijah's except for one crucial fact: John dies. To readers thoroughly familiar with the stories of Elijah, this telling would have been jarring to say the least. If John is Elijah, then by default he must always emerge victorious, but that's not what happened. And Elijah's impotence appears yet once more in the closing chapters of Mark. Bystanders at the crucifixion mistake Jesus to be crying out to Elijah, and they say to themselves, "let's see if Elijah will come and rescue him." Well, nobody came and rescued Jesus. Like John, he met a violent death, powerless at the hands of an unjust system.

Why is Mark so keen to embarrass Elijah? He clearly does not deny Elijah's importance, placing him with Jesus and Moses on the mountaintop, but he undermines Elijah's superhero standing with these two stories of failure. Through John the Baptist, Mark is telling us something we're reluctant to hear. Sure, we can accept the symbolic idea here: Jesus is greater than Elijah, but we don't mention the implications of such a statement.

In the stories of Elijah, God is always on alert, standing at the ready just beyond the clouds to swoop in and visit destruction on Israel's enemies. In times of worry or fear, God gives Elijah super strength or miraculous speed or mysterious food from angels. Elijah is so much fun to read for the same reason that Superman is: he stands for truth and justice and the American way, and he always beats the bad guy in the end. Jesus presents us with a God who is much more nuanced: no superpowers, no nationalism, no glittering victory parades. Instead, we get a God who is wholly committed to grace, to peace, and to deep abiding love. As Jesus and John the Baptist can both attest, it all sounds great in theory, but when you walk that path in the real world, it looks a lot like failure.

John the Baptist barely shows up in Mark's gospel. Two scenes, one line. But through him we are introduced to a God who challenges us more than we'd like to admit. That voice crying in the wilderness is the same as the voice calling out from the cross. They present us with a harrowing choice, one that we must commit to over and over and over in its difficulty, one which requires an entire worshipping community to hold. What kind of God do we want? What kind of God do we have? God grant us the grace to answer honestly, and to respond faithfully.