

A Date for the Pastor and Marilyn

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The week has been filled with minute-by-minute updates about the death of Michael Jackson. First, it was the peculiar circumstances of his death, then rumblings of a mixed retrospective about his life, followed by the national event of a memorial service Hollywood-style in LA, with rumors of a global memorial in the works set for London. The stars present, the guests invited, the tickets raffled for fans, the songs sung, the eulogies offered, hearts touched, tears shed, with all of these images shared on television, in newspapers, online, over the airwaves, under the radar: it is hard to imagine how anyone anywhere could not know that Michael Jackson died. That wasn't the case with John the Baptist. So, Mark devotes the major portion of his sixth chapter to a review of the death of the greatest man to ever live this side of the kingdom of God.

That's what Jesus said in Matthew 11:11 – “Truly, I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John the Baptist. . . .” John met his death alone, without notice, isolated in a prison cell in one of Herod's palatial estates, not because Herod planned it, but because he misspoke in a moment when he was blinded by lust, with his judgment clouded by wine, to make a promise he would soon regret, a promise that would seal his fate as a short-sighted, cowardly, shallow despot who, despite some magnificent accomplishments politically and architecturally, stars in the greatest story ever told as the idiot villain who had John the Baptist killed out of vanity. Herod the Great is simply another ordinary cynic, whose mindless actions miss the significance of the moment, displaying how distracted we can be by who *we* are that we miss what *God* is doing to change the world.

There are many directions we could take this text, but Mark has one thing in mind, grounding us in reality. It has been a whirlwind of an introduction, from the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized by John, to calling disciples, curing diseases, healing the paralytic, forgiving sins, commanding the wind and seas, raising the dead, organizing his first successful missionary campaign: Wow! What a man! There's nothing he can't do. Watch out, world! He's on his way! That's all in chapters 1 through 5. Now we have this text in chapter 6, an extended reminder of John's gruesome death, which foreshadows an extended account of Jesus' gruesome death, which will intrude slowly and surely in chapters 8, 9, and 10, and then take over the whole of chapters 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15. Jesus and John are inseparably linked in life and in death, proclaiming God's judgment of this world and God's promise for the next.

I'd like to say that the Gospel in this morning's Lesson is plainly evident; but where's the good news in a story about John's beheading, and its connection to the unfolding drama of Jesus' crucifixion? What can be good about a story about death? Well, as long as we're talking about death, I'd like to change gears for just a moment. I took Marilyn on another date. It wasn't a preaching call (like the date I described last week), but it did involve the church, as I invited Marilyn to join me at a wedding rehearsal during the early part of the evening of our thirty-third wedding anniversary. She declined; but we did make a date immediately after the rehearsal – dinner and a movie. I grilled the steaks; Marilyn worked the DVD player. Yeah, I know, big spender! Anyway, we saw a movie about Walt Kowalski and his 1972 *Gran Torino*.

It starts out with a funeral, Clint Eastwood's wife, a funeral that features a young priest and his banal attempt at deep thoughts and profound musings. "Death is bittersweet: bitter in its pain, but sweet in its promise." As a young preacher thirty-three years ago in Pittsburgh, I've been there. But rather than taking another walk down memory lane, let's stay with *Gran Torino* for a bit longer. Walt Kowalski lived with the violence of the Korean War all of his adult life, for which he was awarded a medal of valor, the silver star; and his life ended with another moment of uncommon valor and supreme sacrifice, giving his life in death, seeking justice for the violated by sending a gang of villainous criminals to jail for killing the unlikely hero he would become. Where's the good news in that? I'd like to say it's in the theme that justice was done; but that's not really in the story, since we don't see the trial, and there's enough of *Dirty Harry* in Walt Kowalski to imagine that the criminals will probably walk on one of any number of potential technicalities. Plus, there's no reason to believe that the problem of gang intimidation in the streets of Detroit is going away anytime soon. The film seems to do a good job in helping us see that you can try to dress up violence for the good that it does, but it's still violence; and it's still ugly. What's the good news in that? Whatever it is, it seems to be the same kind of Good News we're reading about in today's Gospel.

You can call it *prophetic pre-figurement*, a prophet's gruesome death prefiguring the end that awaits our Lord. You can call it the *revelation of truth*, where the rejection John has suffered reveals the path Jesus will walk as he becomes the way of truth and life. Or, you can call it a *wake up call*, leading to a series of texts that will make it painfully clear that the disciples were hitting the snooze button, and wouldn't wake up until it was too late to see what was unfolding right before their eyes, until it was too late to do anything about it. What's the good news in that? You could say, "Hey, isn't that our story?" Sure, but what's the good news in that? As a story about sin's stain pervading our lives, there's no good news here. As a testimony about the resiliency, tenacity, and persistence of God's love finding a way into sin's story, that could be the glimpse of good news we sense in this morning's Gospel. Sin possesses the seeds for its own undoing, not its salvation. That must come from outside sin's story. Look at Herod, who in many respects was the master manipulator of his time, who, as it turned out, was himself easily manipulated by the inexperienced step-daughter who manipulated Herod into handing his power over to his wife. If it were simply a matter of the world's will, the world would put God's love to death. But it is not about the world's will. It's ultimately about God's gracious love.

That's the good news in today's Gospel story. That's the good news in every story. It's not about how we mess it up. It's about how God's love finds a way to make it right. It's not about the predictable consequences of sin, but the tenacious, persevering creativity of God's grace finding a way to wake us up, to leave us wondering whether maybe there's reason to hope, to believe, to follow in Jesus' way. That's the point of Mark's Gospel, which leaves us at the Empty Tomb, wondering what happened, and hoping that it will happen again, not just for Jesus, but through Jesus for us. And you know what? It does happen, again and again. God's love finds a way to break through the worst that our world can dish out, and leave us hoping, expecting, believing that something more is possible – not because of who we are and what's in us, but because of who God is, and what God desires, which is to save us from our sins, to save us from death's claims, to save us through the power of a love that joins us where we are and will never let us go. That's the Good News Mark's Gospel proclaims, the Good News God gives, and wants us to live ... for Jesus' sake and in Jesus' name. Amen.