

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Several years ago, in visiting an art museum, I was jolted and taken aback by a painting of the beheading of John the Baptist, which is the story we have heard read this morning as today's Gospel.

To be honest, I don't remember the name of the artist, or even which art museum it was in which I encountered the harrowing images on canvas.

Even most of the details of this painting have left my memory – but certainly not all of them. I remember thinking how the raucous party scene of the banquet in the background of this painting seemed totally incongruent with the severed head of a dead man with an ashen complexion being presented on a platter.

I remember the complex expression on King Herod's face – it seemed like a combination of dangerous excitement and yet profound regret, as if Herod was at the same time reveling in his great power, but also asking himself, "What have I done?"

I remember sensing the contrast in the face of Herod's daughter.

There was in her youthful, attractive face the slightest suggestion of innocence, but the intense, cutting stare of her eyes and her wry, wickedly sinful, narrow-lipped smile showed only evil and deceit, as she gladly received her gruesome gift.

But what I remember most about this painting is how real the blood looked. In the foreground of the painting, the blood was pooled on the platter around the head of John the Baptist, and it looked thick and moist like real blood, and I remember feeling a little nauseous, and not even wanting to look at it.

Which, of course, raises the question: Why are we looking at this story? Why does the Gospel-writer Mark alone tell this story, and why does he give such detail in the telling of it?

This is a sad, even dismal story of palace intrigue, seduction, and gore – and we may be wondering, "Where's the Good News here?" Some say Mark tells this story because of its similarity to the account of the death of Jesus. This certainly comes across in the last verse of today's Gospel – did you hear it?

"When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb" (Mark 6:29). That sounds to me a lot like the story of Jesus' death on Good Friday. But there are even more parallels than this.

Think for a moment about the similarities in roles between King Herod here and the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, in the story of Jesus' death. King Herod and Pilate act in much the same way.

Both are hesitant and reluctant. Both want to evade responsibility. Both consent to issue the death warrant only in order to please others. Both assign this nasty and unwelcome task of execution to soldiers.

Of course, I've saved the most significant similarities for last. We should remember the biological connection between the deceased in each story: John the Baptist and Jesus were cousins.

And we should remember the spiritual connection between the two of them: John the Baptist was the forerunner, the messenger, the one who prepared the way for Jesus – and Jesus was, of course, the Messiah, the anointed one, the Savior of all humankind.

Because of this link between the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus, the rejection of John in his imprisonment and slaying runs parallel to, and is similar to, the eventual rejection of Jesus in his sacrificial death by torture and crucifixion.

You may be wondering if Gospel-writer Mark himself sensed all the parallels and similarities between the deaths of John the Baptist and Jesus.

Did Mark see them and purposefully include them in his telling of these stories, or was he not at all conscious of these connections? Of the four Gospels, Mark's is clearly the most primitive, basic, and straightforward, but Mark is still an astute observer and an effective writer – I believe he saw what we see.

I would be remiss, however, if I didn't tell you that not every Biblical scholar agrees. To this end, let me quote The Layman's Bible Commentary:

"Whether or not Mark was conscious of these parallels, he believed that both John (the Baptist) and Jesus had served the same Gospel, and that the work of both would be established in God's Kingdom" (Paul S. Minear, author; Volume 17, p. 81; Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962).

This, ultimately, is why Mark is today telling us about the beheading of John the Baptist: yes, it is in many ways an ugly, offensive, and even repulsive story, but the underlying details of this story show the hand of God at work.

And God's plan is to redeem us from our sin, and this plan is not thwarted, not even delayed, even when humanity is at its worst. Today, Mark is telling us that the death of John the Baptist does not defeat God.

This ought to remind us that the death of Jesus on the cross did not defeat God – in fact, the death of Jesus on the cross was and is God's greatest victory! Thanks be to God! Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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