

When your past catches up to you

An Ordinary Time Sermon by Pastor Rob Hamilton

Delivered on August 15, 2021 amid coronavirus

My second sermon in Geneva as Sr. Pastor

Mark 6:14-29 NRSV

14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." 15 But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." 17 For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. 18 For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. 21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 22 When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." 23 And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." 24 She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." 25 Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." 26 The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27 Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, 28 brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. 29 When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Preamble

On behalf of Pastors Lisa, Mary Gay and the whole UMCG family, I want you to know that we glad you are here today. Last Sunday, we heard great testimony to how God worked in the lives of those who went on our summer mission trip. The week before, was my first Sunday and we started exploring Mark's gospel, chapter 6, where Jesus had run into some trouble in his hometown. Before we continue with Mark chapter 6, I want us to pause here and pray. I invite you to pray for me, for yourselves, and for each other that God might use this time and these words to work in all of us. Please pray with me:

Prayer of Illumination

May the words of my mouth and the mediations of all of our hearts, be found acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

Sermon

Today's story is quite a diversion from what we studied just two weeks ago in the first 13 verses of Mark's 6th chapter, where we read the story of Jesus returning to home and then sending out the disciples in pairs to do the Jesus ministry. Now just before we can hear from Mark about how the disciples faired on their mission. Mark, seemingly out of no where, tells this flashback story of how John the Baptist died. Why might Mark find it important to tell us this out of place story?

One way it could make sense is that Jesus and the Jesus movement was growing. Now that the disciples were out in pairs teaching and healing in Jesus' name - the whole Jesus movement was - as we'd say - going viral. Contextually it could makes sense that it wouldn't be long before King Herod would have to deal with the speculation and rumors about this Jesus guy. Perhaps that is why Mark includes this flashback in his gospel?

For me, the heart of the passage is more than just context for the Jesus movement. I'm captivated by the moment when King Herod tries to discern if there is anything to be concerned about in these rumors and speculations regarding Jesus. This is because one of the major rumors circulating about Jesus is that he is John the Baptist back from the dead and John the Baptist is a name that Herod wishes he could forget. With just one name all of Herod's guilt comes rushing back; he's afraid of being exposed; afraid of his shame being remembered. It's in this one moment, with one rumor and one name that Herod's past catches up with him. What is it about John the Baptist that can illicit such a reaction in Herod?

Before I get to Herod and John the Baptist, let's bring this home for a second. Is there a name, or word, that can bring the past back with all its affirming or discomfoting emotions? Maybe it's not a person, maybe its a place, or a season of your life, or even a smell that can warp time and make your heart pound and mind race. Perhaps we have something in common with Herod, here? Let's go back to Herod and John the Baptist.

King Herod and John the baptizer had some history together. Herod even had a fondness for John the Baptist; though I'm not sure why as John was often critical of Herod's private and public dealings. Still Herod sought to protect John from the anger and vindication of his brother's wife, who was now Herod's wife - thanks to some out-of-control hormones and a carefully planned fratricide. Perhaps the Herod/John the Baptizer relationship falls under the phrase - keep your friends close and your enemies closer- I don't know?

I need to admit that I'm speculating here, because Mark doesn't offer us any explanation to Herod's response to the suggestion that this Jesus figure could be John the Baptizer raised from the dead. Mark only goes into flashback mode. Retelling the events of a wild, drunken party that Herod hosted awhile back where upon he was tricked by his dancing daughter and conniving wife to have John's head brought up from the dungeon on a silver platter. This story is weird, isn't?. Makes for some gruesome paintings too.



Historians and New Testament scholars have thought have determined that Mark likely includes this story to foreshadow what would happen to Jesus. That's why it was really important for Mark to include the part where John's disciples came for the body and laid it in a tomb, so that we could expect the same thing to happen later to Jesus. I suppose these scholars are correct. Theologians tend to agree with these scholars and historians but ask what meaning such a foreshadowing with such a descriptive story has for the people of faith.

While this is probably historically accurate, I feel like God is trying to reveal something in this story - more than foreshadowing Jesus' death. I feel like this passage in Mark tells us something about God, through Herod and maybe that's another reason why Mark dedicates so much time and energy to something that is in the past and whose relevance is not readily apparent. I think this story of Herod tells us something of how God relates to us. Let me explain.

There is some part of us that wants to cover up our wrong doings; to hide our shame; to not be exposed for not doing what we should be doing; to distance ourselves from our sin. Just like Cain killed Abel and tried to cover it up. Or when 10 older brothers became jealous of a snotty spoiled younger brother with a fancy coat devised a plan to kill him, but sold him into slavery instead and then lied to their father with some story of the father's favored son being attacked by wild animals. Or another time when the younger son took all his inheritance and squandered it on destitute living and thought he could hide his transgressions by returning home to be a servant without the honor of being a son in his father's house. Or when Herod lusted after his brother's wife and then had his brother murdered so he could sleep with his brothers wife and not have to worry about covering up an adulterous public scandal.

All of us can relate to some degree. We may have not plotted murder to avoid adultery, or concocted a story about wild animals to cover up human trafficking, but we've done something that we don't want to have to deal with. We prefer the pain of the wound to the pain of healing. This is who we are.

This is our human condition.

This is why when we hear a name, recall a place, smell that smell time starts to warp and our pulse and blood pressure rise. Our past is catching up to us.

Yet, despite our human condition and our sin, God draws near to us. God doesn't get mad and walk out on us. God doesn't get angry and pay us back eye for an eye. God loves us enough to let us have one those moments where our past catches up to us. God gives us the chance to

repent; to change; to make things right. God loves us and there is nothing we can do to change that. So, in those past catching up moments, God uncovers our wrong doings; exposes that which we are ashamed of. God lets our past sin catch up with us; so that we might have a chance to experience God's grace: so we can repent and find new life in the grace of God.

That's what these stories of the bible can teach us about God. God didn't strike Abel down with lightning. God gave Able the chance to confess. Abel confessed and while Abel still had to live with the consequence of his actions, by being removed from the garden with a mark upon him - he still lived and was in relationship with God. Those 10 jealous brothers could have



had their families starve to death but God's forgiveness was demonstrated through Joseph so that their families and nation could live in relationship with God. The younger derelict of a son wasn't sent packing or to the servant's quarters when he came home. When greeted with his father's love, that prodigal son confessed and was restored into his father's home. Herod makes a different choice. He chooses to not confess, to deny his past catching up

with him in this story. We don't have the privilege of knowing if Herod ever comes to accept God's grace. But I trust that God never stopped pursuing Herod. Just like God never stops pursuing us. That's how much God loves us.

A friend of mine is fond of saying: "God loves us enough to meet us where we are and loves us enough to not leave us there." I think Mark includes this weird flashback story to let us know that if our past is catching up with us, its one gracious way that God uses to get our attention; to have the chance to make things right; to experience the amazing grace of God even more than we have before; to love us out of our shame; to love us into a life unburdened by regret, fear, our own striving and a life freed by God's eternal grace shown to us in Jesus Christ. Yes, even that thing we're ashamed of, don't want anyone to know about; or we think is unforgivable. God knows about it.

"God loves us enough to meet us where we are and loves us enough to not leave us there."

God loves us regardless.

God wants us to be healed and free from all that burden, guilt and shame and so God gave us Jesus. So that we might trust more and more in God's grace and let that grace shape our lives until someday there will no longer be the chance to have our past catch up with us again, because we are living a new life in Christ Jesus.

I want to close with a story of how God uses these moments when the past catches up to us as a means of grace. Its a story hat comes from a May 2014 New York Times photo journalism piece by Peter Hiogo from his work in Rwanda where he studied the forgiveness between the Hutus and Tutsis—the two cultures involved in the 1994 Rwandan genocide that took millions of lives because victims and perpetrators remained in the same area and would have regular instances of the past catching up to them and how God used these moments to bring healing and forgiveness.

Consider the story of

Jean Pierre Karenzi - Perpetrator (left) Viviane Nyiramana - Survivor (right)

Jean Pierre: “My conscience was not quiet, and when I would see her I was very ashamed. After being trained about unity and reconciliation, I went to her house and asked for forgiveness. Then I shook her hand. So far, we are on good terms.”

Viviane: “He killed my father and three brothers. He did these killings with other people, but he came alone to me and asked for pardon. He and a group of other offenders who had been in prison helped me build a house with a covered roof. I was afraid of him — now I have granted him pardon, things have become normal, and in my mind I feel clear.”



or the story of



François Sinzikiramuka, perpetrator (left); Christophe Karorero, survivor.

François, PERPETRATOR LEFT): “I asked him for forgiveness because his brother was killed in my presence. He asked me why I pleaded guilty, and I replied that I did it as someone who witnessed this crime but who was unable to save anybody. It was the order from authorities. I let him know who the killers were, and the killers also asked him for pardon.”

Christophe, SURVIVOR: “Sometimes justice does not give someone a satisfactory answer — cases are subject to corruption. But when it comes to forgiveness willingly granted, one is satisfied once and for all. When someone is full of anger, he can lose his mind. But when I granted forgiveness, I felt my mind at rest.”

or how about the story of

Dominique Ndahimana Perpetrator (left) Cansilde Munganyinka - Survivor (right)

Dominique (Perpetrator, Left): “The day I thought of asking pardon, I felt unburdened and relieved. I had lost my humanity because of the crime I committed, but now I am like any human being.”

Cansilde (Survivor, Right) : “After I was chased from my village and Dominique and others looted it, I became homeless and insane. Later, when he asked my pardon, I said: ‘I have nothing to feed my children. Are you going to help raise my children? Are you going to build a house for them?’ The next week, Dominique came with some survivors and former prisoners who perpetrated genocide. There were more than 50 of them, and they built my family a house. Ever since then, I have started to feel better. I was like a dry stick; now I feel peaceful in my heart, and I share this peace with my neighbors.”



and lastly

François Ntambara - Perpetrator (left) Epiphanie Mukamusoni - Survivor (right)

François (Perpetrator, Left): “Because of the genocide perpetrated in 1994, I participated in the killing of the son of this woman. We are now members of the same group of unity and reconciliation. We share in everything; if she needs some water to drink, I fetch some for her. There is no suspicion between us, whether under sunlight or during the night. I used to have nightmares recalling the sad events I have been through, but now I can sleep peacefully. And when we are together, we are like brother and sister, no suspicion between us.”

Epiphanie (Survivor, Right): “He killed my child, then he came to ask me pardon. I immediately granted it to him because he did not do it by himself — he was haunted by the devil. I was pleased by the way he testified to the crime instead of keeping it in hiding, because it hurts if someone keeps hiding a crime he committed against you. Before, when I had not yet granted him pardon, he could not come close to me. I treated him like my enemy. But now, I would rather treat him like my own child.”

What’s happening in Rwanda,
in other places,
in our lives

is nothing more than the power of God’s grace active in the world today. Letting our past catch up with us so that we have the chance at repentance, forgiveness and healing. So if God’s grace can heal ancient Bible stories and modern genocide stories like these in Rwanda; then I know God can use our past to heal us too. **Because our God is one of grace yesterday, today, tomorrow and evermore.** Amen.