

July 11, 2021

Gruesome story... John the Baptist's head on a platter... The visual is enough to make you sick... The gospels don't whitewash reality; they are very clear about human sin, violence and death.

Not only does John precede Jesus in ministry, John also precedes Jesus in death. John and Jesus are connected in life and in death. The same kind of evil that killed John will be the same kind of evil that kills Jesus. In other words, the evil is structural, it is not unique, and it's still present with us today...

King Herod is an interesting person. On one hand he is ruthless, and on the other hand he's a bit of a bungler... One of those people who talk before they think...

King Herod is so infatuated with the daughter's dancing, that when she's done, he spouts out, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." Isn't that crazy? Half of his kingdom?

And of course, he's manipulated, his wife, Herodias hates John the Baptist, and so she gets the daughter to ask for his head on a platter...

The tragic thing is that King Herod actually liked John the Baptist. Our story says, "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man." Herod was actually trying to protect him!

But, King Herod is trapped... He foolishly made the oath before the leaders of Galilee, so he was backed into a corner... Instead of being a king who rules his

kingdom, we seem to have a kingdom that rules over its king. It appears that King Herod is in bondage to his kingdom.

A similar story... Frederick Douglass was a slave whose testimony was prominent in the struggle to end slavery. He wrote an autobiography, describing life as a slave.

He described one particular whipping, where it ended only because the master had finally exhausted himself. The sight of blood had only seemed to intensify the master's rage and fury, can you imagine?

The remarkable thing about Frederick Douglass' story is that he describes how slavery not only dehumanized the slave, but also dehumanized the slave owner -- the master. Like King Herod who seemed to be ruled by his kingdom, Frederick Douglass observed how a slave master became enslaved by slavery.

When even kings and slave masters become victims to their own empires, we can see how subtle and cunning evil operates. Evil is never more powerful than when it is hidden. When it operates in the dark.

So, what kinds of things might we blindly be in bondage to, these days?

Well, how about our media consumption... My little iPhone has an app that tells me every week how many hours of the day I spent looking at it. And I'll be honest, last week I averaged just under two hours! That horrifies me...

But according to a 2019 report released by the Nielsen Company, which measures American media consumption, adults age 18 and older spent 4 hours each day looking at a smart phone. That's double my consumption!

And across all streaming platforms, which include smart phones, computers, tablets, and other streaming devices, it comes out to almost 12 hours a day! And this is before the pandemic! I wonder what the 2020 stats might be?

Don't get me wrong, it isn't all bad; we can and do a lot of positive things with our screens. But, really! Twelve hours? Is media consumption another kind of addiction? I did a brief google search on media consumption and intolerance; not surprising, social scientists are finding a relationship... Apparently, we self-select into groups, and those groups tend to be intolerant of those who are different.

Evil is indeed subtle and cunning and deceiving. So, what is the good news this morning? How does God break us free from this bondage? I wonder if we could ask the question from a different angle— let's put ourselves in King Herod's shoes, what could possibly be good news for him...

Can you imagine how his conscious is bothering him; how his fear is torturing him? He meant to do well, but ultimately, he was trapped and was forced to kill John the Baptist...

Let's imagine for a moment, how King Herod might feel if John the Baptist did come back to life. Imagine John the Baptist talking to King Herod, "Herod, I know you are in bondage to sin—I know you tried to protect me, I know you were trapped in a corner... Please don't be afraid of me, I forgive you," Can you put yourself in Herod's place; how would that feel?

Well, this is exactly what Christ has done for us! We really do mean to do well, but we become trapped by the things that enslave our lives.

And it is exactly in this situation, in this bondage that Jesus comes to us and says, "I know you are in bondage to sin—I love you, and I forgive you anyway." Now go out there, reconcile with one another and try it again... When we hear Jesus' words of absolution, we know that God comes to us in love and grace.

God knows our burdens, and downfalls; God knows the crafty ways of evil, about how we are deceived into bondage. Yet, God comes to us and offers forgiveness.

And it is all God's good pleasure, His arms are wide open, He hears our prayers, He calls us into truth, He forgives us, He adopts us as his children, and He calls us into His Kingdom— where Love wins, and Grace abounds. And our hearts are transformed into being loving, kind, and gracious people, and for the sake of the world. Amen.