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# A TALE OF TWO BANQUETS

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*Mark 6:14-29*



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BCUMC/CCUMC/TCUMC  
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This is weird. We're used to hearing all about John the Baptist in Advent. Every December John the Baptizer tells everyone with ears to hear to repent. So it feels a little weird to get this startling news all of a sudden – in July!

The man who baptized all of Jerusalem in the River Jordan is dead. The thundering prophet has been beheaded. How else would you silence a noisy man?

Wasn't it John's prophetic voice that got him into trouble? He charged Herod Antipas, the highest ranking local bureaucrat, with incest, which put him on the fast track to prison. Herod put aside his legitimate wife to marry his half-niece, Herodias, daughter of one of his half-brothers and the ex-wife of another. It's like something out of "Days of Our Lives." But Herod is employed by the Romans as tetrarch of Galilee. He's somebody, and his new wife doesn't like being scolded by a nobody. So John lands in jail.

Imprisonment should have been silence enough, but Herodias wants John dead, and we already know she's going to succeed. We listen to the rest of the story like car wreck, unable to pull ourselves away.

King Herod was both puzzled by John and attracted to him. He wasn't afraid to listen to what John had to say, the way a smaller man might have been. Perhaps this Herod was more secure than his father, who ordered the indiscriminate slaughter of male infants when he heard about Jesus' birth.

Herod the younger is content with imprisonment for John, but we know his wife is up to something, so we lean a little closer in when we hear there's going to be a birthday banquet. As soon as we hear that, we know John's fate.

The rest of the story reads like a folktale: The dancing daughter whose name is the same as that of the unlawful wife. (Whose daughter is this exactly? It's never really explained.) Next comes the foolish promise of a powerful man, drunk with power, drunk with wine, drunk with food, and the youth and beauty that's on display.

The words Herod uses when he makes his fatal promise are identical to the words used by another ruler from an earlier time, a time that was also dangerous for innocent people. They're the words spoken in the Book of Esther not once, but three times, by King Ahasuerus to his wife, Queen Esther. Mark could be suggesting here that Herod is as foolish a king as the famously weak Ahasuerus. Esther used the drunken promise of a king to save her people. The queen in this story uses the promise to murder a popular prophet.

Once the dancing daughter has done her job, she runs out of the room to ask her mother what she should ask for. Why? It's a little detail that heightens the suspense and raises other questions while we wait. Were there only men in the room? Did she have to run far or was the Queen waiting behind the nearest curtain?

When the request is finally spoken, the words "the head of John the baptizer" are made more horrible by the suspense. But that's not all. The girl may have been a pawn up to now, but this little future queen adds a gruesome detail of her own. She is the one who asks for the head of the Baptizer "on a platter."

What on earth is this awful story doing here? It's a terrible story! How do we say, "Thanks be to God!" after a story like that? I couldn't even find a picture for the bulletin that wasn't downright gruesome!

I think we should skip this story and read the next one instead. It's a much happier story about Jesus feeding 5,000 hungry people. But check this out: Herod's horrible banquet runs right into the story where Jesus makes sure that everyone is fed.

We talked about this a couple of weeks ago: the writer of Mark is a very careful writer. He wants us to read these two stories together. Even though we didn't hear that other story, I hope you remember at least something about Jesus feeding the 5,000. It's a story found in all four gospels.

In the Gospel of Mark, it's a story filled with oppositions and contrasts:

- Jesus withdrew to be alone ... *But a great crowd followed him*
- It was a deserted place ... *But it became an abundant place*
- The disciples said, "Send the people away." ... *Jesus said, "... give them something to eat."*
- We have only five loaves & two fish ... *But more than 5000 ate with 12 baskets left over*

Hear the oppositions: Alone...*Crowd* -- Deserted...*Filled* -- Send them away...*Feed them* -- Too little ...*More than enough*.

But the contrast that I think is most intriguing is the stories themselves -- Jesus' banquet of life, side by side with Herod's banquet of death. The author has put these two stories right next to each other. He wants us to see the stark contrasts between two very different banquets.

As awful as it is, let's go back to Herod's story. This feast was not in a deserted place, but in a lavish palace. There wasn't a large crowd, but a select guest list of important officials. Herod's wife, Herodias, was there, even though she shouldn't have been. Herod had stolen her from his brother. John had condemned this unlawful relationship, and ended up in prison.

Herod was a Jew, but for him, the empire had replaced the Torah. He tried not to think about it, especially at his birthday celebration. But wasn't it enough that John was in prison? Herod liked to listen to John, which was odd because John preached repentance everywhere he went. Was there something inside Herod that remembered God's word, some spark of God that drew him to John's teaching? Then why would he give in to this terrible request?

He promised Herodias' daughter that he would give her anything she wanted. "Even half of my kingdom," he said. He never imagined she would ask for John's head. He was grieved at her request - grieved because he was afraid of the crowd beyond his palace; they revered John as a prophet. Grieved, too, because he was still drawn to John's preaching.

But his guests had heard his oath. Who knows what the officers might tell someone higher up? So Herod gave the command, before long the head of John the Baptist was brought out on a platter, like some ghastly last course.

This was a very different banquet. Not the abundance of Jesus' feast. Not twelve baskets of leftovers, but one horrifying leftover: a prophet's head served on a platter.

Herod could have made a different choice, but the empire had replaced God in his life. Though he loved to listen to John the Baptist, he couldn't risk his reputation to spare John's life. The empire shaped his values and his decisions. Feeding hungry crowds was not on Herod's agenda.

Of course, Rome fell centuries ago, doomed by its expansive victories--too many troops needed in too many far-flung places. That is always the temptation for any nation, including our own. The United States now has military bases and troops in 63 countries. Our military installations cover 30 million acres, making the Department of Defense the world's largest landlord, and our military budget is larger than the next 25 highest spending nations combined.

Is it possible to maintain an empire and feed people who are hungry? The leftovers of empire have always been destruction and death--even in the name of peace

and security. There is always enough money for weapons, but never enough to feed those who are hungry.

Into a world such as this, Jesus comes with an alternative vision. "The kingdom of God is at hand," he said. That means 'nearby – right here'. Over and over he taught about it, told parables about it, and lived it wherever he went. Jesus brought his kingdom-vision to the crowds who interrupted his solitary time of prayer. When the hour grew late, the disciples said, "This is a deserted place...send the crowds away so that they may go into the village and get some dinner."

Everything rational in us thinks, "Good idea!" Herod would have said, "Good idea!" Send them away. But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

But, Jesus, we can't. You have to understand. Hunger is a very complicated global issue. If we give money to poor countries, corrupt leaders divert donations for themselves. The needs are too immense--we don't know where to start. I don't have the time or the wisdom to figure out what to do. Even if I did, I'm only one person. I have only five loaves and two fish.

Jesus knows we are perplexed, but my excuses are no better than those of the disciples! Jesus knew long ago what economists and hunger activists tell us now: we have everything we need to end world hunger. It would take \$13 billion a year -- less than 3% of our defense budget.

Art Simon was a pastor in a little church on the lower east side of New York City. Everyday hungry people came to his door, and the congregation tried hard to give food to those who came. He knew churches raised millions of dollars to feed the hungry, but he also knew that one bill passed by Congress could allocate billions to feed the hungry.

So, thirty-five years ago, Art Simon founded Bread for the World, a Christian citizens' lobbying organization. He made the case for political advocacy--even if we work at the local food pantry or deliver Meals on Wheels. He said, "Each of us helps to decide how our nation should use its power and wealth in a hungry world." – "Each of us."

You may be doing a great deal already to end hunger in our community and beyond. Or you may feel guilty and demoralized by everything I've said. What I want you to know--no, that's not it--what Jesus wants us to know is we can do something.

That's what Jesus was saying when he refused to send the hungry crowd away. "You give them something to eat," he said. We can do something and we can begin today...

- Read these two stories in Mark 6 several times this week. Then ask yourself what you can do -- "You give them something to eat."
- Pray. Pray for our country and for our leaders. Pray that they remember the hungry people
- Check out the Bread for the World website. Write a letter to congress.
- And don't be ashamed if you and your family need food stamps. Everybody has the right to food.

Our lives are filled with choices. Herod chose loyalty to the empire. He presided over a banquet of death. Jesus called his disciples to make a choice: "You give them something to eat." They could have said "no" -- they only had five loaves and two fish -- barely enough to feed themselves. But Jesus called them to more. They did have something. You have something. And so do I. Jesus blesses and multiplies everything we bring. When we do that, there will be a banquet of life for everyone.

Amen.

God of abundance, you have showered this earth with blessings. Open our hearts and our hands to those who are hungry, those in our neighborhood, and those far away. Give us courage and compassion so that all your hungry children will be fed. Amen.