

+ IN THE NAME OF JESUS +
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 14, 2024

“GOD IN THE BACKGROUND”

MARK 6:14-29

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him."¹⁵ But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He 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 it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her.¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not,²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.²² For when Herodias's daughter 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 to you."²³ And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom."²⁴ And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist."²⁵ And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."²⁶ And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her.²⁷ And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison²⁸ and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother.²⁹ When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Prayer:

Dear friends, loved by God in Jesus Christ:

Introduction: In the last 24 hours, have you thought at all about the ceiling? Probably not. So, why do I ask? To point out that there are countless things each day that are definitely there, yet we pay little attention to them because they are – shall I say – in the “background.” Other things, “*front burner*” things, are demanding our attention, and these “*front burner*” things push those other things into the background. They are surely there, but we give them little if any attention.

Our Gospel reading leads me to speak with you about **GOD IN THE BACKGROUND**. There are lots of times – probably the vast majority of times – when we can't see what God is doing. We may even wonder if He is there at all for us. But, just because God is not working in the “fore-

ground” does not mean He is not in the “background” of life, causing all things to work together for the good of His people in Christ (Cf. Rom 8:28).

I. GOD IN THE FOREGROUND (IN OUR TEXT)

Our text is a great example of this. Mark reports little here of God working in the foreground – out in the open, doing things we can see and cheer. In fact, we barely see Him working at all, and it leaves us wondering, “What does this teach me about God?” “Is there any good news here?”

A. Jesus had people talking.

I find only one hint of God working in the foreground. It's in the first line of our text: “King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known” (v14). Herod heard of *what*? Answer: God, working in the foreground! Jesus and His disciples had people talking! He had sent them on a mission and exciting things resulted. The sick were healed. Demons were expelled. And this drew attention to Jesus' message: “Repent and believe in the Gospel!” (Mk 1:15).

B. Who could this be?

This had people wondering, “Who could this be?” “Could this be Elijah?” People expected Elijah to come just ahead of the Messiah (Cf. Mal 4:5-6). Others thought Jesus must be one of the great prophets of old. “But when Herod heard of it, he said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised’” (v 16).

II. GOD FADING INTO THE BACKGROUND

But in this text, that's the end of God in the foreground, God working in a way we can see. Suddenly God, and Jesus, and all this excitement fade into the background, and in the foreground, we are shown a gruesome scene.

A. In our text

There was a reason (here in our text) that Herod wondered if John the Baptist was raised from the dead. Herod is the one who had killed him. After John condemned him for his adulterous marriage to his brother Philip's wife Herodias, Herod had John imprisoned, but prison did not silence him. He kept on preaching, and Herod kept on listening. In fact, he liked listening to John.

Then came Herod's birthday. He threw a big party, and invited all the power-brokers, whose support he needed to stay in power. At this party, Herodias' daughter danced for the guests, and Herod was so please with

her performance that he made a foolish promise: *“Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom”* (v 23). So she consulted with her mother Herodias, and returned with her request: The head of John the Baptist. Herod was afraid to back down on a promise he had made so publically in front of all his guests, so he gave the order, and the deed was done.

So, yes, there was a reason Herod thought Jesus might be John, raised from the dead. It sounds like someone haunted by a guilty conscience!

So ends our text. John’s disciples retrieve his body and bury him. But, is this good news? After the Gospel reading, I say, *“This is the Gospel of the Lord,”* and you respond, *“Praise be to Thee, O Christ!”* Can we say about this reading, *“This is the Gospel of the Lord?”* *“Praise be to Thee, O Christ!”*? Was this gospel to John? Did Herod’s guilty conscience hear this as good news?

B. In your life

So, that’s our text. But what does it mean for your life? What problems are you facing? In and out of a hospital bed? Struggling with sickness? Concern for a loved one with pain or declining health. Maybe, like John, you suffer for the name of Christ. Maybe, like Herod, you are haunted by a guilty conscience. And maybe in your situation you wonder, *“Where is God?”* *“Is this the Gospel of the Lord?”* *“Is God in the background good news?”*

III. IS “GOD IN THE BACKGROUND” GOOD NEWS?

A. No.

The answer to that question is both “No” and “Yes.” Here’s the “no” part: Your sickness; the death of a loved one; any suffering for the name of Jesus; the plague of a guilty conscience – these things always force themselves into the foreground of life. We must face them. In the foreground of human life, we see sin and all the things it has brought into the world: Guilt, brokenness, sickness, death. These are not good news. None of these is how God intended life to be. There was nothing good about John’s execution, and nothing good about the suffering we must face in life: Suffering for the name of Christ, as God’s enemies try to silence His Word; suffering illness; suffering the plague of a guilty conscience; suffering death. These ugly things occupy the foreground of life, and we can see no good news in them.

B. Yes.

Yet, in spite of this, there is a loud “Yes” to speak to our question. But it we don’t find it in the foreground. It is in the background. God’s Voice has not been silenced, and His Gospel has not been defeated.

Take John, for example. He lost his earthly life – in a barbaric, gruesome way. But his voice was not silenced. Herod’s guilty conscience shows that he still heard John’s voice. As for John, he got to trade in his earthly voice for a new, eternal voice in heaven.

What about Herod and his guilty conscience? Nothing good there – except that, even he, even now, was being called to repentance. Even after killing God’s faithful servant John, God still offered him forgiveness in Christ!

And God is at work in the background for you, even in times of suffering. You won’t see how. That’s why I call it “God in the back-ground.” But He is there, all the same. St. Paul wrote in Romans 8(:28) *“that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.”* Your suffering for Jesus’ sake will have its end. Meanwhile, you are making a powerful witness to God’s love for all. Your time of illness will end – if not in this life, then in the life to come *“which”* (St. Paul says) *“is far better!”* (Phil 1:23). And, because of the forgiveness you have in Christ, He will give you a glorious, resurrected body and a life that never ends. If you are plagued by a guilty conscience, it’s only because God loves you and wants to bring you to repentance, and receive the forgiveness Christ won for you.

Conclusion: We rarely think about the ceiling; but it is surely there, all the same. Likewise, when we are surrounded by problems, it is hard to see God at work, hard to recognize His Gospel; but it is surely there, in the background, supporting us every step of the way. Christ died to put it there. He rose so you would know it’s there. And in God’s time and by His grace, He will reveal it to us; and we will join our resurrected voices with John the Baptist and the great cloud of witnesses, praising the God whose love is always there in the background of our lives, guiding and leading us home. In this holy faith, may God’s Holy Spirit ever keep you.

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