



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

**Sermon for Pentecost 8**

July 14, 2024

## Lost Heads

### Mark 6:14–29

<sup>14</sup>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." <sup>15</sup>But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." <sup>16</sup>But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." <sup>19</sup>And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, <sup>20</sup>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.

<sup>21</sup>But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. <sup>22</sup>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." <sup>23</sup>And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." <sup>24</sup>And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." <sup>25</sup>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." <sup>26</sup>And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. <sup>27</sup>And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison <sup>28</sup>and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. <sup>29</sup>When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

John the Baptist lost his head. Why? Because he insulted the queen. He accused Herod of adultery: "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." Of course, this accuses his brother's wife, doesn't it? So Herodias, Herod's wife, whom he took from his brother, "had a grudge against [John the Baptist] and wanted to put him to death." It took some machinations to accomplish this, but eventually, with the help of her daughter, she got it done. Herod lost his head, figuratively, watching his step-daughter doing the dance of the seven veils, and John the Baptist lost his, literally, as a result.

I wonder how Herodias felt then. Did this act relieve her embarrassment? Did it



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

## **Sermon for Pentecost 8**

July 14, 2024

appease her anger? And how about Herod? Was he relieved that he didn't have to give up a significant chunk of his kingdom? Or was he horrified by what he had been trying to avoid? And what about their guests? Did this satisfy their craving, their bloodlust, to see the severed head of the strange preacher served up on a royal charger? Or were they disgusted by an entertaining evening gone horribly wrong? Were any of them – Herod, Herodias, their noble guests – [were any of them] better off for the experience? And what about John himself? Was he, who never lost his head in life, worse off now that he'd given his life for the proclamation of the truth? Or did he fulfill his destiny, "finishing his course," as Paul puts it to the crowd in Antioch (Acts 13:25).

John was called to be the forerunner of Christ, to "prepare the way of the Lord" (Mark 1:3). He was a throwback to the Old Testament prophets – wearing strange clothing, eating strange food, preaching fire and brimstone in the wilderness, calling people to repentance. He was an anachronism, a man who didn't fit the times he was living in – an Old Testament prophet in the New Testament era. And people responded to him the way they often did with the prophets of old. John proclaimed the Word of the Lord, he was persecuted for it, and eventually he was killed because he wouldn't shut up, he wouldn't stop preaching. Even the most casual perusal of the lives of the martyrs reveals that the pattern remains consistent throughout history.

Most of us here today can likely recall that for much of our own history, the preaching of the truth had a certain resonance in society. Most people went along with it, even if they didn't like it. But we'd be very foolish to think that such days and such attitudes are still with us. The warm acceptance of the truth in days-gone-by gave way to a cold stolidity and a sort of *laissez-faire*, live-and-let-live, posture. But the cold war of indifference has been heating up, as those who oppose the truth are less and less content in letting us have our say. Persecution is on the rise on the world stage, even here in our own land of the free and home of the brave.

But, as the drama plays out, where do we find ourselves among the cast of characters? Are we more like John the Baptist, or like Herod and Herodias? How much different than Herod and his ilk are we, when it comes right down to it? Do we not like to think of ourselves as sovereigns of our own worlds, that our lives are our own, to live as we please? And are we not flattered when people commend us for it?

This was the position of Herod and Herodias. Herod was the king, and you'd think he would be in charge of his own kingdom. That's what he thought, anyway. And he was used to people congratulating him for just about everything he did. This is what you do with royalty, isn't it? You certainly did in those days. And what you didn't do was openly criticize the monarch, even if you had a legitimate complaint.

John the Baptist had a legitimate complaint. The king was openly practicing adultery,



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

## **Sermon for Pentecost 8**

*July 14, 2024*

expecting everyone to fawn all over him, as though he were some kind of champion for daring to live as they secretly wanted to live, but didn't have the courage to. But John was not about to play that game. God had called him to preach the truth, even if it made him the enemy of those residing in the palace.

Was it an irritation to Herod? Absolutely. But his conscience wouldn't allow him to go beyond having John thrown in prison. There was something about John's preaching that rang true to him. You see, he knew that he was living wrongly, so whatever anger stirred in him from John's accusations, it was tempered by a part of him that desired to be more faithful to what he knew to be true.

Isn't that true for us? We want to be faithful, don't we? We cherish our connection to God our Father through faith in His Son, but there are times, are there not, that we feel an attraction to what we know to be sin. It's dichotomous; we sinful humans are of two minds about such things. But let us not lose our heads, beloved. Rather, let us ponder a couple of things.

In the clash between our desire to be faithful and our propensity to sin, we must recognize that it's not our faithfulness that saves us, it's Christ's. "When we are faithless, he remains faithful," Paul writes (1 Tim. 2:13). "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8).

When you think about it, it's not really even our faith that saves. It's Christ's faithfulness in obeying His Father's will – in being born, suffering, dying, being buried, rising, and ascending in our stead . . . *that's* what saves us. The writer to the Hebrews says: "He had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Heb. 2:17). "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful" (Heb. 10:23). "The testimony of Christ was confirmed among you," agrees Paul, "so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:6-9).

So, what is the role of faith? It clings to the faithfulness of Christ. It abdicates any and every claim to contribute anything in a positive way to our salvation. We could say, actually, that our faith, in giving up any kind of active role in our salvation, loses its head, surrendering it to the true Head, which is Christ. "He is before all things," Paul says, "and in him all things hold together, and he is the head of the body, the church" (Col. 1:17–18a). Our faith doesn't try to be the king; it simply receives and trusts in the faithfulness of Christ. In this way we must all, like John the Baptist, lose our heads. Ironically, that's exactly what happens when we're baptized.



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

***Sermon for Pentecost 8***

*July 14, 2024*

But, more than that, because of the faithfulness of Christ, we, like John the Baptist, never really lose our Head (Christ), for even when we die, we merely follow Christ, who was laid in a grave, but was raised from the dead. As for Him, so, too, for John the Baptist, and for us – all because Christ came to fulfill what John the Baptist foretold but could not do: suffer, die, and rise in victory over sin and death.

Beloved, you, together with John the Baptist, are baptized into the death that laid Christ in the tomb – the death from which Jesus rose to give you life now and forever through the forgiveness of sins, of which John, the first to lose his head for the sake of Christ, is also a blessed recipient. Thanks be to God! In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen