

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel, Year B

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Mark 6:14-29

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

14King 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." 15But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

17For 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. 18For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20for 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. 21But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 22When 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." 23And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." 24She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." 25Immediately 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." 26The king was deeply grieved; yet

out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, 28brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. 29When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

DIAGNOSIS: Stuck in the Past

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): The Haunting Memories

Herod thought that he had put the pesky John the Baptist out of his life and silenced him for good when he served his head up on a platter to Herodias. He would never again have to be bothered by the prophet's complaints concerning his scandalous marriage to his brother's wife. However, when he heard of a prophet (Jesus) who was also preaching repentance, his conscience pricked him again. He wondered if John had come back from the dead to continue to harass him. Even the rich and powerful are haunted by the memories of a past they cannot escape.

We are no different. Regardless of how much we try to forget and bury the sins of the past, sooner or later something triggers our memory and pricks our conscience. We are haunted by a past we can never seem to flee or forget.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): The Frightened Cover-Up

Despite having the power and prestige of royalty, Herod is a pathetic figure. He is frightened that he will lose what he believes makes him great. In search of something that will satisfy the longings of his heart, his desperate displays of power reveal that he is merely trying to cover-up the emptiness in his soul. He marries his brother's wife and then arrests and

imprisons John for criticizing him. Fascinated with and yet frightened of John, he just wants to keep John quiet and continue his cover-up. At a lavish birthday party, intended to further win the approval of his cronies, his devious wife manipulates him into giving the head of John to her daughter on a platter. Now with the reports of another prophet proclaiming repentance, his fear and desperation are overwhelming him. Even from the grave, John is coming back to exact revenge.

The same kind of fear plagues us. We are afraid that the past we want to keep hidden will one day raise its ugly head. Therefore, the denials and cover-ups only worsen. We resent anyone who calls us to account or to repentance. We may not silence them by cutting off their head, but we will try to silence them with a host of other strategies intended to discredit our critics and muzzle their criticism. Because we are so afraid that our desperation will be exposed, the lies and hypocrisies continue to isolate us.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Trapped by the Past
Herod's fear that he will have to pay for a past that he regrets and cannot cover-up comes to fruition. Rome, disgusted with his leadership, his scandalous behavior and a bloody war with his brother (whose wife he stole) exiled both him and his wife to a place no one knows. They died in obscurity only to be remembered for this sordid tale of treachery and murder. God will not be mocked.

We may not be engaging in illicit affairs, imprisoning our enemies, or chopping off the heads of those we don't like. But like Herod we think that we are in charge and can simply run away from our past and a God who holds us accountable. However, sooner or later, there will be that voice we hoped to never hear again. There will be some bump in the road that jars us out of our routine. We will be reminded of skeletons we thought we

could keep buried in the past. It all signals our final inescapable and deadly fate. We are trapped by a past that mercilessly judges us. God will not be mocked.

PROGNOSIS: Freed for the Future

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Revived by the Past

When Herod heard of Jesus' disciples preaching, it was like a siren sounding. It was as if an alarm went off. Herod was afraid that John had come back from the dead to get him. However, when Jesus showed up, the siren sounded different. Jesus would not simply write off the past as if it never happened. Instead, Jesus digs up the past we (and Herod) want to forget, not to throw it in our face but to bear it and carry its bloody consequences for us, all the way to the cross and empty tomb. In exchange, Jesus gives us a platter ... not with his "head," but with his body and blood ... at his table. There he gives us the new life and fresh start we crave. Ironically, we are revived by a word from the past. But it's not the deadly word we expected; it's the surprising, life-giving word of the crucified and risen Christ.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Confident in the Present

Trusting that word, everything changes. No longer having to cover-up the rubble of our past, we are not afraid but confident of who and whose we are. We do not have to "cut off the heads" of those whom we fear will expose our tawdry past. Instead, with repentant hearts we can confidently move on with our lives, trusting the mercy God has given us in Jesus. We get to GO BACK TO THE FUTURE. We get to face the future fearlessly. We trust that what happened back there at Calvary and the empty tomb opens up a new and bright future for us now. Our sins have been forgiven and the cursed consequences of the past have been

undone.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Free for the Future
We no longer need to obsessively look backward, afraid of what others might see. Now we can live our lives the way God intends them to be lived. We can live looking forward into the future, free from the accusations and burdens of the past. And free FROM the burden of always having to cover our bases, we are free FOR others—to create a new world and trust the promise of the risen Jesus. Unlike Herod and his kind, we can accept the criticism. We can right the wrongs. We can even forgive those who have hurt us. By going BACK TO THE FUTURE created by Christ, the kingdom announced by Jesus is already taking shape in the world around us.