

Today's Gospel reading has all the makings of a particularly sordid episode of HBO's neo-medieval TV series *Game of Thrones* or *House of the Dragon* except, instead of House Targaryen and House Lannister duking it out over who will control Westeros, we have an internal conflict in the House of Herod which controls Judea. The main character, Herod Antipas, is one of three sons of Herod the Great, the King of Israel we know best as the one who massacred all boys under the age of two in Bethlehem in hopes of destroying the newborn Messiah. This Herod had fourteen children from ten wives; naturally, his family politics were complicated—too complicated for a brief Sunday sermon. Suffice it to say that for these reasons the main character in today's story, Herod Antipas, had a complicated marriage to a woman named Herodias. Some found that marriage to be some complicated that it was even scandalous. Among its critics was John the Baptizer—Jesus' cousin who was the hugely popular prophet who baptized Jesus and declared Him to be the long-awaited Messiah. John criticized Antipas and Herodias' marriage so strongly that he was arrested and imprisoned. We just heard the rest of the story: Herodias wanted John the Baptizer to be executed, but Antipas was captivated by his preaching and protected him. At a feast celebrating his birthday to which all the local political, economic, martial, and religious leadership were invited, Antipas was so pleased with a dance that his wife's daughter performed that he promised to give her whatever she wanted up to half of his kingdom. Herodias, the girl's mother, told her to ask that John the Baptist's head be brought to her at once on a platter. Bound by his public oath, Antipas ordered John's immediate decapitation. Afterwards, John's followers came to the prison, took his headless body, and buried it.

Like those bloody TV series, this story is gross, weird, and would seem to be inappropriate to be described in church, much less in one of the four Gospels. What does this have to do with the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God Incarnate Who came among us to bring us the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of our Resurrection? Given the unique tone and characteristics of Mark's Gospel, the story is even weirder. Mark is the shortest of the Gospels. It seems to be focused on only the essentials of Jesus' life among us. Why, then, does Mark's Gospel spend so much time telling how and why John the Baptizer died—as much time, in fact, as it does in telling how Jesus died and, shockingly, much more time than in telling how He rose from the dead?

We might remember what Church Tradition says about the circumstances in which Mark's Gospel was written. According to Tradition, during the Emperor Nero's persecution

of the church in Rome, St. Peter—who was the bishop who oversaw and cared for the Roman church—was arrested, sent to prison, and condemned to death. While awaiting his own crucifixion, Peter was visited by Mark who wrote down what Peter dictated to him about the time he spent with Jesus. Mark’s Gospel is short because Peter is in a hurry. At any moment, the guards might come to bring him to his death. Peter’s flock is frightened and discouraged. They, too, might be arrested at any moment, but even if they survive their leader is about to die. Peter knows that his flock wonders where God is in the time of their deep need. What is God doing while they suffer?

Isn’t that the most important question? Leaving aside the stories of Herodian dynastic politics and the history of the 1st century church in Rome, what we most want to know is where God is in our story? Where is He right now? What is He doing when we need Him the most and do not see Him?

The story of John the Baptizer and his death is actually a flashback—a story-within-a-story. Just before it, as we heard over the last two weeks, Jesus had performed some amazing healing miracles in Galilee and everyone was talking about them. When Herod Antipas hears about them, he is convinced that Jesus is John the Baptizer who has come back from the dead. Peter tells this story-within-a-story to explain why Antipas feels this way. But just before, just after the healing miracles but before Herod Antipas, Jesus sends His disciples out, two-by-two, to “proclaim that all should repent” and to cast out demons and anoint with oil many who were sick. And this is what they do. And immediately after the story of Herod Antipas and John the Baptizer we hear how all the disciples return from their journeys and tell Jesus everything that they had done. In other words, the story of John the Baptizer is sandwiched between the time Jesus’ disciples go out into the world to proclaim the Gospel and when they return in victory. Everything that happens to John is bracketed between and enframed by Jesus’ disciples going out and coming back, their proclaiming the Good News of God’s love for mankind and their return to worship Him together.

That is Mark’s answer—that is Peter’s answer—to the question of where God was in this story and, in fact, in every one of our stories. Even when John was in prison and then beheaded, even while Christ lay dying on the Cross and then dead in the tomb, even while Peter awaited his execution, even while we endure what we must and hope for what we do not yet see, God is at work to bring about His new Creation through Christ in us. Faith means trusting in and even surrendering to a God Whom we do not yet see but is shaping

everything into a Kingdom that exceeds everything we can possibly imagine—especially while it remains hidden to us.

I've mentioned to you the story of the Olympic athlete named Eric Liddle, the Scottish runner whose Olympic victory was portrayed in the film *Chariots of Fire*. He was favored to win the 100 meter race in the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris, but he refused to run because the finals were scheduled on a Sunday. His principles led him to believe that to run would dishonor God's Sabbath. A member of the British team gave Liddell his place to run the 400-meter race, which he was not expected to win, but was not held on a Sunday. Before the race, an American *masseur* gave Liddell a slip of paper quoting I Samuel 2:30 in which God says: "Those who honor Me, I will honor." Liddell kept this slip of paper in his palm as he ran to not only win the Gold Medal but to establish a new world's record. But that Olympic victory was not Eric Liddell's greatest victory. Afterwards, Liddell traveled to northern China to serve as a Christian missionary. In 1941, while he was there, the Japanese invaded Manchuria, prompting the evacuation of all British nationals. Liddell chose to stay in northern China to serve Christ's poor. He bade farewell to his wife and two daughters (and an unborn third, whom he would never see). In 1943 Liddell was interned in a Japanese concentration camp where he so completely shared the love of God with its families and children that one of them later wrote a book describing Liddell's camp as *The Courtyard of the Happy Way*. In 1945, Winston Churchill himself brokered an exchange of prisoners that was meant to liberate Liddell, but Liddell gave his place to a pregnant woman, laying down his life to save her and her unborn child. Five months before the war's end, amid squalor and tyranny, Liddell died. His last words were, "It's complete surrender."

If we must surrender to temporary suffering for the enduring truth of God's love, our suffering is only a repetition of what John the Baptizer endured at his decapitation, an aftershock of what Christ defeated at His Resurrection, and a precursor of the new Creation that God is making in and through us. In these moments of surrender to the love of God for His love's sake, God draws us closer to Himself and through us draws others to Him. So whether we find ourselves afraid, sad, angry, or lonely—whether we feel close to God, far from God, or feel nothing of God at all—we surrender to Him. And in that surrender of blind trust that—no matter what—God loves us and will always be at work for us—we finally find the conversion of every one of our prisons into the Courtyard of the Happy Way.