

First Sunday in Lent - February 18, 2024

Mark 6:14–29

“John and Herod”

1. Tracy and I recently watched the movie “Anatomy of a Fall” which, as you’d expect, is about someone falling, but which is also about someone dying, as viewers learn in the first few minutes of the film.
 - a. It’s our tradition that as Oscar season starts, we try to get to as many movies nominated for a Best Picture Academy Award as we can.
 - i. “Anatomy of a Fall” already won this year’s highest honor at the Cannes Film Festival in France
 - ii. It was shown at Yes Cinema, and I was eager to watch it.
 - b. The movie is so tense that the opening credits set you on edge
 - i. Even if you sit to watch the movie without first having seen its trailer, as the opening credits flash on the screen, your mind already starts racing because they display the name of website for the movie: www.didshedoit.com
 - ii. Instantly you’re wondering: Did she do what? And who’s she?
 - c. The story line has twists and turns, making you question the motivation of the main characters
 - i. The movie is set in the picturesque snowcapped French Alps, and in an imposing wood-paneled courtroom.
 - ii. The dialogue rapidly flips between English and French
 - iii. And just as rapidly flips your opinion about each character
 - iv. And without spoiling it, the audience can see the intended and unintended consequences of actions by each of the characters.
 - v. It’s like a line of standing dominoes, and seeing the first one fall, leading to a chain reaction which we know had already led to a tragic outcome.
2. Today’s gospel lesson is also a tragic story which itself foreshadows certain death.
 - a. We are accustomed to read or hear the stories in the Bible in little segments, but it’s worth remembering that these are originally long narratives, entire stories told with a full arc of drama.
 - i. The memorable stories in the Gospel we know guide us through the life and ministry of Jesus through his death and resurrection
 - ii. And the stories were told and retold by gifted story tellers orally, until eventually they were committed to history in writing
 - iii. Hearing even a segment of a larger story, the original audience would have noted echoes of ancient stories and previews of upcoming stories
 - iv. In today’s story, they would have heard the similarities from the story of Jezebel and Elijah (which Tim preached about last week), and they would have anticipated that Jesus’ fate would be in the hands of another Roman official on Good Friday
 - b. We began Lent this past Ash Wednesday, which is the time of the church year when we symbolically join Jesus in his journey to Jerusalem, where he will eventually face death on the cross.

- c. This year Mark's narrative gives us first the story of John's execution.
- d. This story we read today is messy, disturbing, confusing even
 - i. It has questionable characters and motives
 - 1. Herod seems like a powerful ruler, yet seems tentative, at once pleased by John and afraid of him
 - 2. Herod's wife Herodias seems trapped by patriarchy, yet is very effective in working levers of power to her advantage
 - 3. And daughter Herodias, who is not clear if she's an innocent bystander, or a teen eager for drama being manipulated by her mom
 - ii. There are moral dilemmas, jealousy and vengeance
 - 1. Herod jailed John to stop him from criticizing him, but also to protect him from Herodias who wanted him dead
 - 2. Herodias was set on vengeance, and made no secret of it
 - iii. We see manipulation and abuse of power
 - 1. The Anatomy of a Beheading, could be the name of this story
 - 2. We watch the careless display of bravado by Herod, plus Herodias' grudge,
 - 3. We imagine the potential embarrassment of Herod if he didn't fulfill his promise to daughter Herodias
- 3. One remarkable aspect of the complex story leading to John's execution is how dominoes fall and lead to terrible consequences
 - a. As listeners of the story, maybe the first domino to fall was John publicly challenging King Herod
 - i. That sets the whole story, told as a flashback after the death of John
 - ii. Remember, the story is first about how Herod had heard about the teachings of Jesus, and Herod says to himself: John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.
 - iii. Had John said nothing, he wouldn't have been targeted: But John spoke truth to power
 - b. Certainly Herodias looked for her opportunity to manipulate her husband into killing John
 - i. That was one domino that took its time to fall, looking for the right timing
 - ii. What's more, it needed to be done in a way which wasn't overtly seen as the action of Herodias – she had to make it look like it was Herod's idea
 - c. Herod's careless and crass use of power and influence shows his actual insecurity and weakness
 - i. Herod set in motion a number of dominoes by this banquet
 - ii. Scholars disagree on some of the details of it, but agree that Herod was acting shamefully in asking his daughter to dance (perhaps provocatively) before strangers
 - iii. Herod looks desperate for approval, offering a lavish dinner to impress, and then boasting a big reward to his daughter
 - iv. And then he can't back out. He painted himself into a corner and is easily outmaneuvered by Herodias

- d. For as much tragedy and violence as there is in the passage, there is only one display of remorse, King Herod feeling sorry (though not clear if it is for being caught flatfooted or because he cared at all about John's life)
 - i. The actual person to order the execution is for a split second seen as sympathetic character.
- 4. Since the theme for Lent this year is "From the Heart," something to consider in our introspection during this season, is thinking about what may be those dominoes in our hearts – dominoes of intention, of past actions, of unresolved grief – which may tumble us towards unhelpful outcomes (or worse!)
 - a. As you may remember, Lent invites us to deepen our connection to God and to one another through some specific disciplines
 - i. Prayer, Service, Generosity, Fasting, Confession
 - ii. So this passage I feel challenges us to ponder opportunities for confession, and better yet, of working towards restoration
 - b. I wonder if as I mention these things, you are picturing dominoes which were tipped in your life.
 - i. We connect with those difficult emotions or events,
 - 1. when we may have felt trapped by unjust systems
 - 2. when we got outmaneuvered by our anger or shame
 - 3. when we said or did things we wish we could take back
 - ii. But this isn't an exercise in despair, but a discipline of confession
 - 1. We turn to God for forgiveness
 - 2. We turn to God for the strength to straighten up dominoes
 - 3. Lent is our yearly reminder of our frailty, but at the same time of the life-giving grace of God
 - iii. And empowered by that, we dare to look at ourselves in the mirror to give ourselves grace to move on
 - 1. We dare to believe that sin does not get the last word
 - 2. We then dare to lead lives where we give others the grace to straighten the dominoes which once led to painful consequences
 - 3. We dare to invest in restorative justice
- 5. Lent itself may feel somber because we're encouraged to look deeply at places in our hearts where we need forgiveness, but Lent is really the Good News, just played in a minor key. There is grace. There is love. Amazing Grace. Unstoppable Love.

Reflection questions

1. What does Lent mean to you?
2. At how many different turns could the story in Mark 6:14–29 have changed to avoid its tragic ending?
3. In your life, what are some turns you wish you had taken (or which you may still take) to avoid a regrettable outcome?