

“There is a moment,” Flannery O’Connor writes, “There is a moment in every story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected even though the reader may not recognize this moment.”¹

In this Gospel reading, Mark captures one of these moments like lightening in a bottle. He uses a storytelling device, a flashback, to insert a powerfully dramatic moment into a still larger story.

Mark’s Gospel seems always to be hurrying along and, true to form, we are moving like the wind when Mark suddenly transports us to an earlier time, to a scene focused on a different character. Mark wants us to ponder Herod’s story. Something about the execution of John the Baptist will help us to see the reign of God at hand. This little story-within-a-story is packed with lust and greed, murder and political intrigue, and so it has inspired artists, writers, and musicians for centuries. But if we want to feel the grace flowing like a river beneath all that fascinating drama, we need to know what happens before and after the flashback.

In the scene just before our reading, Jesus gathered the twelve, granted them authority and sent them out to embody and announce and the coming of a new realm—to enact the presence of God’s grace.

In the scene that immediately follows our story, Mark’s narrative will return to the present. Jesus will gather the disciples back together to hear what they have been up to and invite them to a deserted place for refreshment. Once there, they’ll find themselves surrounded by five thousand hungry people whom they will feed with a few loaves and fishes.

Mark interrupts the natural flow of that uplifting story with the introduction of Herod Antipas who has heard about Jesus and his disciples, and the impact they are having. People are gossiping about Jesus, guessing about his social status and honor—is he the resurrected baptizer, a man whose authenticity has impressed even Herod? Is he one of the ancient prophets, perhaps even the great prophet Elijah? Herod has a strong opinion, perhaps even a fear: “John,” he says, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

¹ Connor, Flannery, and Sally Fitzgerald. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969.

Then comes Herod's flashback—the memory of an opulent birthday party that Herod has thrown for himself. The party where he executed John the Baptist to honor an ill-advised public promise made to his niece and step-daughter, Salome², the daughter of his illegitimate wife, Herodias. Herod Antipas is recalling a moment in which perhaps only now can he see that he had an opportunity to accept or reject the presence of mercy, justice and faithfulness. He is recalling a moment when he rejected grace and now lives with the consequences. Yet even as he reminisces, hope is available.

Mark's storytelling is compelling because he does not reduce Herod to a caricature or a stereotype. Instead, he gives us the image of an immoral, but complex man who is set in the midst of genuinely hard realities. Herod is not really a king, but a tetrarch—one of four who rule over the kingdom they have inherited from the deceased Herod the Great. As first century Mediterraneans, they live in a society based on honor and shame. Publically recognized honor is essential to life itself in this society, and honor is a limited commodity. For one person to gain honor means another must lose it.

John is gaining honor and Herod has made a few serious missteps.

He has brought a woman from his own family to dance—a shameless act given the cultural circumstances because Salome's dancing would have been highly erotic. None of his commanders and senior officials protested which made them also shameless. Herod has publicly promised half of his kingdom to Salome, knowing full well that he was in no position to grant that promise. His situation is genuinely threatened.

But it was Herodias, his wife, who apparently made the connection with John's growing honor more clearly than Herod did. Herod respected and feared John as a righteous and holy man, which says a great deal about how far the public assessment of John's honor had risen—a rising that must surely be drawing down Herod's own. Herod is at risk and, through Salome, Herodias presents him a choice that amounts to this: Will you act like a self-protective, earthly king or will you embrace the opportunity to be an agent of transformation?

Herod is a man shackled by his own appetites. He may even hold the keys to some of those shackles, but he is unable to set himself free. Grieved at the choice before him, he nevertheless immediately gives in to his self-

² Mark inaccurately refers to Salome as Herodias.

interest, his pride and his fear. He has John beheaded and John's disciples lay his body in a tomb.

The writing ends there, but I like to imagine the scene silently playing out for just a few seconds longer. I like to imagine the flashback as though it were in a film, dissolving into Herod now back in the present, contemplating the choice he made. He is at risk once again. Perhaps he is thinking that if John is resurrected, he might be coming for Herod's head in retribution. But more importantly, if John has risen from the dead, then the entire Roman Empire is at risk. Death was the primary method of imperial control, but if John's resurrection has overcome or destroyed the power of death, then Rome's entire superstructure is about to come crumbling down.

Herod is again faced with hard realities. He sits in a new moment in which he might be able to feel the presence of grace as it waits to be accepted or rejected. And then the scene ends, leaving us right there at the edge. It is a lonely edge, but one that is we all come to from time to time. It is a grace-filled edge, even when we make the wrong choice or simply can't bring ourselves to make the right choice. It is an edge pregnant with grace because it is a learning edge.

So often when we get to a moment where we can see the right action to take but can't bring ourselves to take it, we do one of two things. We talk ourselves out of the possibility for change by telling ourselves versions of "I'm not perfect, I'm only human" or "God will take care of it, it's not really up to me" or something like "Someone should do something about that." Or we talk ourselves down, berating ourselves with versions of "I don't practice what I preach" or "I'm living a lie" or "I'm just a fraud."

We do face dark, fearful and hard realities from time to time, do we not? We live in a world filled with hatred and racism, with people killing each other in the name of God. Day-to-day many of us struggle to balance work pressures and family needs. We negotiate and navigate relationships, or seek relief from loneliness or grief. We hear unkind gossip, or we encounter racism or social injustice, and can't bring ourselves to say or do something about it. Well, at least that's been my experience.

We sit, you and I, we sit with Herod at pregnant learning edges. We *could* choose to move away from this edge by abandoning all hope for walking

toward a better future. Or we could explain the suffering away. Or there is a third way. We could see and embrace the holy moment made available to us.

You see, God's steadfast love and our faithful trust can meet at this learning edge. Herod's story is told in the middle of a larger story of tremendous, world-changing grace. And so is ours. Grace meets the hard realities of the world even now for all of us. It is a grace that marries suffering with hope; hope with suffering.

Christiaan Beker was a young Dutch boy when the Nazis captured him in and put him to work as a forced laborer in Berlin. Many years later, as a professor of New Testament Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, Beker wrote this: "Whenever we divorce the experience of suffering from our projects of hope, suffering itself loses its inherent relationship to hope and instead becomes a form of inactive, introverted, resigned or despairing suffering.

"Conversely," Beker went on, "whenever we divorce hope from suffering, hope disintegrates into a wishful 'Dreamsville,' a desperate assertion that we will 'win the race to the future' or into an egocentric project of survival, a hope 'fenced in' and 'protected' from the reality of suffering in the world."³

The learning edge that God invites us into *begins* with our recognition, simply our *awareness*, that we are in one of those moments where grace is waiting to be accepted or rejected. We can wait with grace in the tension of the moment, simply noticing it—neither rejecting nor embracing for just a moment. We can pause at those learning edges to pray and ponder: which is the path to the self-protective banquet of power and cravings, and which is the path to the transformative banquet of loaves and fishes?

The "already and not-yet" reign of God is abundant life for all. God's steadfast love is present even in a world warped by past and present evils. That means we *can* act, even with the smallest steps. We can act not on our own, but with renewed trust in God's presence.

³ Beker, Johan Christiaan. *Suffering and Hope: The Biblical Vision and the Human Predicament*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.