

Week of May 23, 2021

Matthew 14:1-21

¹ At that time Herod the ruler heard the news about Jesus. ² He said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist. He's been raised from the dead. This is why these miraculous powers are at work through him." ³ Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison because of Herodias, the wife of Herod's brother Philip. ⁴ That's because John told Herod, "It's against the law for you to marry her." ⁵ Although Herod wanted to kill him, he feared the crowd because they thought John was a prophet. ⁶ But at Herod's birthday party Herodias' daughter danced in front of the guests and thrilled Herod. ⁷ Then he swore to give her anything she asked. ⁸ At her mother's urging, the girl said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a plate." ⁹ Although the king was upset, because of his solemn pledge and his guests he commanded that they give it to her. ¹⁰ Then he had John beheaded in prison. ¹¹ They brought his head on a plate and gave it to the young woman, and she brought it to her mother. ¹² But John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus what had happened.

¹³ When Jesus heard about John, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. When the crowds learned this, they followed him on foot from the cities. ¹⁴ When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion for them and healed those who were sick. ¹⁵ That evening his disciples came and said to him, "This is an isolated place and it's getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ But Jesus said to them, "There's no need to send them away. You give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here except five loaves of bread and two fish." ¹⁸ He said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke the loaves apart and gave them to his disciples. Then the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ Everyone ate until they were full, and they filled twelve baskets with the leftovers. ²¹ About five thousand men plus women and children had eaten.

A Devastating Reality and Incredible Hope

Up to this point in Matthew's gospel, John the Baptist had been mentioned off and on. Jesus was baptized by him in chapter 3 and he was arrested in chapter 4. In chapter 9, when his disciples questioned Jesus about who he really was, he was still in prison. And here he is again, still in jail, but now it's the end, as we hear the sad, and somewhat gruesome, story of his death. The cause of his imprisonment and death is finally made clear - he criticized someone in power and it cost him his life. This was the hard reality of life in Roman Palestine- the wrong statement could cost you everything. Rulers, like Herod (a different Herod than was ruler when Jesus was born), held an absolute control on power and would rid themselves of anyone they deemed a threat to their power. It's inconceivable for American readers of scripture who hold the right to free speech to be sacred in its own right, but most of the world has lived under these conditions since the dawn of civilization - the wrong words, said at the wrong time to the wrong people, could be a death sentence. And it wasn't just words, but actions. If what you did was seen as a way to undermine the State, you could find yourself in prison or worse.

Understanding that devastating reality is key to unearthing the hope of the miracle of the feeding of 5,000. When readers of scripture encounter the feeding of the 5,000, it generally isn't in the context of Jesus finding out that John had just been killed for daring to criticize Herod's choice to marry his sister-in-law. That context is important, however, because it speaks to the difficulties of living in such a rigidly controlled society. Even food was controlled, as Rome saw itself as the breadbasket of the world with the ability to feed every hungry person, so long as they submitted to their power, of course. But Jesus offered something else, a subversive kind of hope because it bypassed all that Rome believed itself to be. Theologians can argue about the miracle of this feeding all day long - was it Jesus providing something out of nothing, or did Jesus get the people to understand that God had already given them abundantly and they could experience that abundance if they but shared their resources? But in the end, either interpretation is fine because it demonstrates that God provides. Whether God provided in the moment or had

already provided and the people hadn't recognized it isn't the issue at hand. The people needed hope that rulers like Herod, who controlled every aspect of their lives, wouldn't win the day, and Jesus gave them that. Jesus' actions showed the people that in God's reign the people are cared for, not abused. He showed them that their basic needs, like food and healthcare, would be provided. All it took was a little faith that it is possible, that God not only can, but already does, rule. May it be so.

God of abundance, in the face of devastation and fear, you provide your people with hope. We are given the hope of love, of nurture, and above all, of life. May we trust in your reign, giving ourselves to it completely and joining in the mission of Jesus, whose death and resurrection has released us from the captivity of scarcity and fear. Amen.