

Who doesn't love a birthday party? Kids certainly love them, especially if they're the birthday boy or girl. Friends come bearing gifts, there's cake and ice cream, and often times the celebration may even take place at a local amusement park, pizza arcade, waterpark, or someplace else where kids can run wild. Blowing out birthday candles is an annual rite of passage in America, though the older we get, and the more candles there are, the less excited we seem to become.

For parents, birthday parties can often be stressful and filled with all of kinds of intrigue and drama that accompany the lives of their little ones. Mom and Dad typically want everything to be perfect but, inevitably though, something's going to go wrong during junior's party time. Case in point, just listen to some horror stories from birthday parties gone bad:

- + A family decided to throw their 8-year-old daughter a surprise party, only to see her burst into tears when everyone yelled "Surprise." She sniffed, rubbed her eyes, and declared that surprise parties "made her heart hurt."

- + One party hired a clown to entertain a bunch of 5-year-olds, only to discover that half the kids screamed in terror when they saw him. The parents had to ask the clown to leave. I'm sure at least a few of us can relate to that experience, clowns can be creepy after all.

- + At another birthday celebration, one of the kids showed up with a stomach bug and began throwing up in the middle of the ball pit, on the cake, and even on the gifts. As a bonus, everybody left with a party favor featuring their very own stomach bug to take home.

No doubt those families still carry scars from those birthday party disasters, but all of them, of course, pale in comparison to what has to be the worst birthday party in the history of birthdays. Parents and little ones may have lost their minds (and their lunches) at the ones I just mentioned, but no one lost his or her head. That ultimate party literally took place at the infamous birthday bash thrown by

Herod Antipas. And in our Gospel this morning, the story is told in the form of a flashback narrative.

Once upon a time, a certain king -- his name was Herod Antipas -- became aware of an itinerant preacher from Nazareth who was performing all sorts of miracles. King Herod wasn't technically a king, but rather he was a *tetrarch*, a Roman-appointed governor of the territory of Galilee. His father, Herod the Great, was called a king, but he, too, was really one in name only, being an operative of Emperor Augustus at the time Jesus was born.

Rumors about Jesus had been circulating, and people speculated about who he was. Some thought he was John the Baptist raised from the dead, others Elijah, and still others thought he was another one of the Old Testament prophets. Notice that these are the same rumors Jesus' own disciples mentioned when he would later ask them, "Who do the people say that I am?" The king was convinced that only one of those rumors could be true -- that John the Baptist, the prophet whom he had both feared and revered, had come back from the dead.

This then leads us to our party flashback found in Mark, which gives us the details regarding the Baptizer's demise. King Herod arrested John, and put him in prison, because the prophet had condemned the king's marriage to the queen -- who happened to be his brother's ex-wife. The king saw himself as a sort of modern messiah, working, as he was, on the temple in Jerusalem as his father had done. John attacked that line of thinking by saying in effect that no real messiah would do the kinds of shameful things that Herod had done.

And what had he done? He had fallen in love, or in lust, with his sister-in-law Herodias, who was the wife of his half-brother Herod II, who was also known as Philip" in the New Testament. They'd met around 29 CE when the king visited his half-brother on the way to Rome. As for his sister-in-law, the idea of becoming

the wife of a tetrarch appealed to her, and she agreed to marry him if Antipas got a divorce from his first wife. So he did. And so she did.

Herodias then divorced Philip and eventually moved into the king's palace where they hoped to live happily ever after. But not only was their marriage a political problem, it was also a major violation of Jewish law, which forbade marriage to a brother's wife, unless it was to raise a deceased brother's children. But, Philip was not only alive; he and Herodias had a daughter together. And because John the Baptist wasn't afraid to speak out against their shady and illicit family dynamics, Herodias saw him as a pain in her aspirations and wanted him dead and out of the way.

The king, on the other hand, feared and protected John because he was a holy man and he liked his preaching, even if he didn't quite get it. You might even say that Herod should have been more than "perplexed" at what John was preaching. John was proclaiming nothing less than the coming of the real messiah. The kind of kingdom, and power, that Mr. Antipas desired was nothing compared to the one who would usher in the kingdom of God. In fact, the acting King would be confused about Jesus until the end. Sadly he would never come to the realization that the one who would eventually wear a crown made out of thorns was the real royalty.

Ok, so when the king's birthday rolled around, he decided to throw a party for himself, and he invited the rich and powerful members of his court. And although Jews generally didn't celebrate birthdays back then, the Romans and Greeks did, and therefore the king, being an aficionado of all things Roman, wanted to celebrate, to boogie on down, to get his freak on!

Apparently, the parties of the Herodian court were legendary for their excesses. So it goes without saying that King Herod most likely indulged in more than a few glasses from the punch bowl. Herodias, seeing her chance to influence

her new spouse, and bump off that annoying prophet, had her daughter dance for her new husband.

Loosened up and lusty from partying, Antipas went gaga over his stepdaughter (another no-no) and made a rash oath that he would give her anything she wanted, even half his kingdom, which wasn't his to give in the first place. And when the daughter went to her mother for advice, on what to ask for, the nasty queen was ready with the request: "I want you to give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter." Apparently, she wasn't much of a cake and ice cream kind of person.

Anyway, the king now trapped by his own words, and not wanting to lose face in front of the members of his court, reluctantly ordered the prophet's head served up on a plate. The girl then gave it to her mother, as though she were giving her mother a birthday present. Afterwards, John's disciples came to claim his body and laid it in a tomb – perhaps a foreshadowing of Jesus' own death, and a reminder that death is, more often than not, the party favor for those who speak truth to power.

And the **moral of the story?** It's interesting that Mark spends more ink on this narrative than others we might expect. In his rapid-fire telling of Jesus' life and ministry, he doesn't ever give us an account of Jesus' birth, and only a few slight details featuring his baptism by John, his journey into the wilderness, and not all that much regarding the teachings of Jesus, which are found in the other gospels. Today's tale looms large, however, and perhaps it's because Mark wants us to recognize that following the true king is a costly business. Giving our allegiance to him will often put us sideways with the political and social forces that seem to govern our world.

Speaking the truth often results in being ignored, and pushed aside, at best. And, at worst, it may even put us on a cross. That's where the true messiah will go,

and he doesn't hesitate to tell us that we are odds-on favorites to join him there. This is a theme that Dietrich Bonhoeffer explores in his classic book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. There, he reminds us that "when Christ calls a man, he bids him to come and die."

But today's odd story from Mark's gospel also reminds us that we are invited to a different sort of party. Immediately after the horrific events of a party gone wrong, Mark offers another party story where things go better than anyone could have possibly imagined. Jesus will feed more than 5,000 people with just five loaves and two fish -- not exactly a birthday party menu, but far more sustainable. In contrast, King Herod threw a party in honor of himself and his own birth, with an exclusive guest list restricted to the rich and powerful, and in his drunken lust condemned a holy man to death.

Neither Mark, nor Jesus, seem to care all that much about the real messiah's birthday. And yet, Jesus threw a party for the poor and hungry out of compassion and brought life to people in need. The question Mark asks us today than is, "Which king do you want to follow, and which party do you want to be a part of in the end?"

The Baptist's death foreshadowed the death of Jesus who, like John, had spoken truth to power. The result is the same. Death. But we know that wasn't the end of the story. The party was just getting started, and it's still going on. And if anyone fails to join the party being thrown, or they miss out on it for one reason or another, it's not because they haven't been invited.

After his Resurrection, before ascending into Heaven Jesus instructs his disciples to invite everyone to the party! That includes you, me, and people of all nations, races, colors, creeds, sexual orientation, age, and economic status. So if you haven't yet accepted the invitation, perhaps today would be a good day to RSVP. Amen. Thanks be to God.