



# MINISTRIES

A Ministry of the Athens Universal Life Church  
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**TITLE:** A Good Word for Bad Times

**SERMON IN A SENTENCE:** The story of John's martyrdom, set inside the story of the successful mission by the Twelve, assures us that God is at work—and is winning the victory—even in the worst of times.

**SCRIPTURE:** Mark 6:14-29

Today's scripture lesson comes from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 6, verses 14 to 29.

Starting at verse 14:

King Herod heard of this, because Jesus' name had become well known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that's why supernatural powers are at work in him."

But others said, "He's Elijah." Still others said, "He's a prophet—like one of the prophets."

When Herod heard of it, he said, "John, the one I beheaded, has been raised!"

For Herod himself had given orders to arrest John and to chain him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married.

John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife!"

So Herodias held a grudge against him and wanted to kill him. But she could not,

because Herod was in awe of John and was protecting him, knowing he was a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard him he would be very disturbed, yet would hear him gladly.

Now an opportune time came on his birthday, when Herod gave a banquet for his nobles, military commanders, and the leading men of Galilee.

When Herodias's own daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. The king said to the girl, "Ask me whatever you want, and I'll give it to you."

So he swore oaths to her: "Whatever you ask me I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

Then she went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?"

"John the Baptist's head!" she said.

Immediately she hurried to the king and said, "I want you to give me John the Baptist's head on a platter—right now!"

Though the king was deeply distressed, because of his oaths and the guests he did not want to refuse her.

The king immediately sent for an executioner and commanded him to bring John's head. So he went and beheaded him in prison,

brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.

When his disciples heard about it, they came and removed his corpse and placed it in a tomb.

-- May the Lord add His Blessing to the reading of His Word!

-- Hello, I am Doctor Rob White with the A U L C Ministries with our message this week.

-- I am happy that you can take a few minutes out of your busy week to be with us today!

Let's talk about what it means to be famous. A famous person is one who is known by lots of people. Famous people usually become known because they have a special talent or have done something remarkable that other people admire.

Let's look at some famous people:

- George Washington was the first American president, a good leader and a brave, heroic man.
- Bill Gates developed software programs which allow us to use and enjoy computers in our homes.
- Vincent Van Gogh has many beautiful paintings.
- Bugs Bunny and he is famous because he makes us laugh.
- We could list many other people who are talented musicians, inventors, writers, ministers, or doctors.

The Bible tells us that when Jesus lived on earth he was famous. King Herod and others heard about his miracles; they heard that he cured people who had been sick. They knew about Jesus because he developed a reputation for helping people. In the Bible we read that "Jesus' name had become known."

All these years later we still know about Jesus and he still has a reputation for helping people. We could say he is the most famous person of all time. He is famous for what he did to teach us about God's love.

If you were flipping through the Bible looking for inspirational stories, you wouldn't linger long over the story of the martyrdom of John the Baptist. It's a real "downer." The king not only has John the Baptist killed, but he passes John's head around on a platter.

We know that things like that happen, but we would rather hear about something else on Sunday morning.

But this story of John's death is in three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—which suggests that it's important. Perhaps we need to take a moment to see if there is, in this story, a word from God for us today.

When I first read this story, it seemed pretty grim, but when I studied it in more detail, I realized that it's also a story of hope—an encouraging story for difficult times. It takes some digging to learn that, but learn it I did.

The story of John's martyrdom is a story set inside another story. Mark has been telling the story of Jesus sending the Twelve on a mission—a very successful mission—and then he interrupts that story to tell this story of the death of John—and then he returns to the story of the Twelve, which he concludes with this verse:

"The apostles gathered together to Jesus,  
and they told him all things,  
whatever they had done,  
and whatever they had taught" (as we see in verse 30 of our scripture text today).

The apostles told Jesus what they had done! What had they done? They had called people to repent, had cast out many demons, and had anointed sick people and cured them. In other words, these apostles had been doing great things for Jesus. Mark interrupts that happy story to tell us the grim story of the death of John the Baptist.

Why would Mark do that? Why would he start telling a big success story, and then interrupt it with this terrible story about John's death? Why would he include the gruesome details—Herod and his guests passing around John's head on a platter?

As nearly as we can tell, Mark did that as a way of saying, "Look! Terrible things happen! Nothing could be more terrible than this gruesome story of John's death! But don't be fooled! That's not the whole story! Something important is going on in the background while John is being martyred, and that something important is God conquering evil—disciples casting out demons.

Mark is saying, Yes, terrible things happen—but wonderful things happen too! And the wonderful things trump the terrible things. God is at work in the world, and we should never wonder who is going

to win. This story of John's death—set inside the story of the apostles' successful mission—promises that God will win—and God's people will win.

That doesn't mean that it will be easy. Mark is reminding us that bad things happen—that bad things happen even to good people. John the Baptist wasn't doing something wrong when they killed him—he was doing something right.

Herod imprisoned John because John criticized Herod for marrying his brother's wife. That upset Herod a little bit, but it upset his wife, Herodias, a whole lot! She wanted to kill John. It's very possible that Herod imprisoned John just to keep him away from his wife. Mark tells us that Herod tried to protect John—that he liked to hear him talk. Herod saw something good—something holy—something true—in John. He wanted to protect John from the wicked queen.

But one night Herodias got her chance. Her daughter danced a dance that Herod applauded. I don't even want to think about what kind of dance it was. Any other father would have put a stop to it immediately, but not Herod! He told the girl that she was wonderful, and offered her anything she wanted—up to half of his kingdom.

So the girl went to her mother for advice. What should she ask? The answer was easy! She should ask for John's head. And so she did—even adding her own touch—she asked for John's head on a platter!

Even Herod was horrified at the idea—but he was also trapped. All the important people were at that banquet, and they had heard his offer—and they had heard the daughter's request. Herod found himself between the devil and the deep blue sea. He didn't want to kill John, but he also didn't want to embarrass himself in front of his friends. And so he had John murdered.

But, in the background, the apostles were out there on their mission—preaching—calling people to repentance—casting out demons—healing the sick. God was not absent, and evil was not winning the race. Yes, one good man was being murdered, but dozens or hundreds were being saved.

Mark's church needed to hear that! By the time Mark wrote this Gospel, the church was suffering terrible persecution. Christians were being imprisoned—even killed—not because they had done something wrong, but because they had done something right. I believe that Mark wrote this story within a story to reassure them. Yes, bad things were happening, but they should not doubt that good things were happening too. God was at work in the world, and everything would come out all right in the end.

We need to hear that too. If life was difficult for Christians in Mark's day, it is often difficult for us as well. We live in a dangerous world. People who would like to kill us now have the bomb.

And then there are the more personal threats—threats from without and threats from within. When I was growing up in a small town many years ago, many people didn't even lock their doors. A person could walk the streets at night without fear of attack. Those days are gone forever. Now we hide behind security systems in our homes and in our cars. We buy cell phones, in part, so we can call for help if necessary. That's what I mean by "threats without."

But the threats within are just as frightening. Some years ago, a doctor took a look for polyps, and told a friend of mine that he had discovered a flat polyp. I didn't understand the significance at the moment, but it didn't take long to discover what "flat polyp" meant. It meant cancer—and surgery—and three

weeks in the hospital—and six months of chemo—and weeks of radiation. "Flat polyp" meant wondering if my friend would see another year. It meant establishing two plans for his family—one for use if he lived and the other if he died.

But it isn't just serious illness that threatens to undo us. When I was young, I sometimes felt really terrible because I was in love and the girl wasn't. You can talk about puppy love, but those who have been through that know that it's not puppy pain.

When faced with danger or pain, it's difficult to believe that there is anything right about the world—or our lives. But these two stories—the story of John's martyrdom set inside the story of the successful mission of the apostles—tell us that God is at work. They assure us that God will win. They promise that, if we walk with God, in the long run all will be well. That's an important promise to remember when we are in danger—when we are suffering.

Some years ago, Charles Colson—Nixon's old henchman—became a Christian. His conversion turned his life around. He had been a tough guy who had specialized in making people miserable. He became a gentle guy who specialized in bringing people hope.

Then Colson discovered that he had a malignant tumor. He said, "I thought I would be shattered." He talked about the pain of hearing his doctor tell him that he had cancer—and the pain associated with the treatment of his disease—but then he said this:

"As many have discovered before me,  
I saw in my confrontation with fear and suffering  
that there is nothing for which God does not pour out his grace abundantly."

I don't know if the name Helen Keller means anything to you or not. Some years ago, she was quite famous, but I don't often hear her name mentioned today. Hers was an amazing story. As a toddler, she suffered a disease that left her blind and deaf. She grew into childhood completely cut off from sight and sound. Her parents tried everything to communicate with her, but were largely unsuccessful.

Then her parents invited Anne Sullivan to work with young Helen, and Anne tried something that she called "finger spelling." Anne devised a code that she could tap into Helen's hand. She tapped a word for "doll" and handed Helen a doll. Helen realized that Anne was trying to say something, but couldn't understand what. Then Anne tried to teach Helen the word for "cake," but again Helen failed to understand. The two of them worked together for a month, gradually developing a bond and friendship—but Helen still couldn't grasp what Anne was trying to teach her.

And then, one day, Anne tapped the word for "water" and then pumped water from an old hand pump over Helen's hand—and Helen "got it." Her face lit up with joy because, for the first time in her young life, she had a way to communicate with the people around her. It was an enormous breakthrough, and it changed Helen's life—it changed Anne's life—and it changed the lives of millions who heard Helen's story.

Helen Keller became famous, because she was a woman of enormous spiritual depth. She wrote things that encouraged people who were having a hard time. People knew how much she had suffered—and how much she had overcome—and they found themselves very open to Helen's counsel. As an adult, Helen said many wonderful things that helped many people. One of them was this. She said:

"Although the world is very full of suffering,  
it is also full of the overcoming of it."

Any of us could say those words, but they have real power when they come from the lips of one who has genuinely suffered and genuinely overcome the suffering.

"Although the world is very full of suffering,  
it is also full of the overcoming of it."

I think that's one of the things that Mark is telling us in this story within a story—the story of John the Baptist's death set inside the story of the apostles' mission. Mark is telling us that, if we will walk in faith, God will transform our Gethsemanes into lovely gardens where we—and others—can come to find strength and to grow in faith. He is telling us not to lose hope even in the midst of the most terrible circumstances, because God is still at work, and God will prevail.

The poet, Joyce Kilmer, put it this way:

"The roar of the world in my ears,  
Thank God for the roar of the world!

Thank God for the mighty tide of fears  
Against me always hurled!

Thank God for the bitter and ceaseless strife,  
Thank God for the stress and the pain of life,

And oh, thank God for God."

-- That's our Lord's message for this Lord's Day and I hope you got a blessing out of it!

-- Go out this week and be a blessing and be blessed! -- For the more you are a blessing, the more you will be blessed!

-- Thank you all for watching and listening and we will see you all next week!

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