A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on July 15, 2018 (Proper 10B)

I know what you're thinking. 'He's had four months to write this sermon — it better be *amazing*.' But just to lower your expectations, I started writing the sermon on Thursday. My sabbatical reentry included a return to my usual sermon writing routine, over coffee at Redeye Roasters. Now, I could go on and on about the coffee I had (Colombian) and the tasting notes (lime and stone fruit), and the mouth feel (smooth). But that would just be a distraction to divert from the fact that I may be a bit…rusty.

In fairness, it's slightly jarring to get back into the pulpit after four months only to encounter John the Baptist's head on a platter. I was hoping for more of a Good Shepherd vibe to ease my way back into things, but that's okay. It's a good reminder that life, like a wonderful sabbatical, can end rather abruptly. (Which is a terrible metaphor — they assured me this would be just like riding a bicycle!).

This story of Herod and his wife Herodias and their daughter Salome and John the Baptist is full of intrigue and passion and heartbreak and death. There's a reason Richard Strauss turned it into an opera — it has every ingredient for compelling narrative, dripping with the full spectrum of human emotion. There's also a reason, given the outcome, that when my father conducted Salome with the Honolulu Opera, he told me the stage hands had t-shirts printed up that read "Get Ahead with Salome." That's some dark humor right there.

This morning, amid all the captivating characters in this story, I want to focus on Herod. But, first, a bit of background is helpful to set the scene. King Herod had John imprisoned, at the urging of his wife, because John had criticized him for divorcing his previous wife and marrying Herodias, his brother's widow. According to the Law of Moses, this was considered adultery and John was unrelenting in his condemnation.

Herod himself might not have cared too much about John's protests over his marriage — we hear that he actually considered John a "righteous and holy man." But his wife Herodias held a massive grudge against the man who publicly condemned her marriage. Encouraging her husband to imprison him wasn't enough. She was out for blood.

On the notorious evening in question, Herod was throwing himself a big birthday bash and as part of the festivities his daughter, Salome, danced for the king and his guests — the famous, sensual Dance of the Seven Veils. Her dancing pleased Herod so much that in his intoxicated state he promised to give her anything she desired. Now, you would have thought that a pony would have sufficed or maybe a new iPhone, but when Salome consulted with her mother, Herodias seized her opportunity for revenge, telling her daughter to demand the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

This is where we glimpse Herod's true character. While he was appalled by this request, he had made his daughter a very public promise. And we hear that "out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her." Herodias had played her diabolical hand brilliantly, knowing Herod was more concerned with saving face than doing the right thing. And the king's insecurity sealed John's fate.

Now, when I was in Jordan a couple years ago, I visited the ruins of Herod's palace. It was built by Herod the Great — the one who appears in the birth narrative of Jesus and, upon hearing of this newborn

king, murders every male child under the age of two. Not a nice guy. The Herod we hear about today, is his son Herod Antipas. The palace in question is situated high atop a mountain with stunning views in all directions. If you were to pick the perfect location to display dominance over your subjects, this would be it. As we hiked up to the palace, our guide pointed out a number of man-made caves cut into the mountainside, which had served as cells for prisoners. John the Baptist was likely held in one of these, and as he wasted away in isolation, he could probably hear the festivities taking place up the hill. The sounds of music and laughter and drunken revelry wafting down to his cell. John must have been confused when armed guards abruptly opened his cell and seized him.

The point is, Herod held all the cards. He embodied all the trappings of the powerful ruler. The palace, the resources, the clothing, the entourage, the military might. He ruled all that the eye could see and held authority to give life or take it away. While John embodied…nothing, really. He was a shell of himself, a man full of bluster who had been reduced to a silenced, gaunt prisoner. Weak and vulnerable in the face of the world's powers and principalities. At least on the surface of things.

Because John's public *courage* stands in stark relief against Herod's public *weakness*. John spoke boldly, knowing full well the consequences. Herod spoke boastfully, without consideration of the consequences. Throughout his life John was defined by his words; he was the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord, the forerunner of the Messiah. While Herod is, ironically enough, imprisoned by his words. Caught in his own vanity and unable to acknowledge his mistake and walk back his pride, a holy and righteous man is put to death in a most grisly and gruesome way. Evil sees the light of day, enabled by weakness and insecurity.

There are times when our public fear of confrontation limits our ability to act courageously. The pull to just go along and not rock the status quo is powerful. It happens at work with coworkers who act inappropriately; it happens in bars with friends who make sexist comments; it happens with family members who tell racist jokes. Oh, it's mostly done in the name of jest. 'Relax, can't you take a joke?' There have been times when I have said things in such situations and there have been times when I have not.

But here's the thing about moral courage: it is a muscle that demands exercise. If we don't use it in small ways, it will have atrophied when human life is at stake. We will be so used to remaining silent in the face of injustice, that our voice will not sound when it really matters. Herod's voice of moral courage had become the empty sound of silence. When it mattered most, Herod was powerless to stem the tide; too weak to put an end to the madness.

What he couldn't know, is that the narrative didn't end with the executioner's blade. Even with his head on a platter, John's voice resonates. Pointing us towards Jesus; reminding us that the path of least resistance is rarely the path of moral courage; highlighting the strength of character that transcends the world's notion of power and weakness.

Allow the prophetic voice of John to guide you again and again towards Jesus Christ. The Savior of the world was also seemingly silenced, slaughtered on a hill outside Jerusalem. But the voice of justice lives. It rises up and encourages us to be strong in our convictions. Even when it's not easy or unpopular. That's the still, small voice of God residing deep within us; the voice of love and justice and compassion yearning to be released into the world. Open your heart and lips and let it speak the truth. It's not always comfortable, but it is always the way of God.