

A Double Take  
July 9, 2009  
Mark 6:14-29  
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- 14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him."
- 15 But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."
- 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."
- 17 For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her.
- 18 For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."
- 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not,
- 20 For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.
- 21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.
- 22 When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it."
- 23 And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom."
- 24 She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer."
- 25 Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."
- 26 The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.
- 27 Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in prison,
- 28 Brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.
- 29 When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

About four years ago, I accompanied Bill and the PSA students to Boston for the Boston College vs. Clemson football game. Like most people, we took the “T” – or transit system – from Boston out to Chestnut Hill. And as we sat there, Bill gives me a head nod toward the back of the car. As I scanned the crowd, I did a **double take** as there reading his newspaper was none other than the late news reporter Tim Russert. Evidently his son went to Boston College and he was on his way to the game too. We fought the urge to go over and say hello, choosing to play it cool and respect his space...but it was hard.

Another time, Bill and I and Will Grey were attending a visitation for a family member of one of our Fort Hill members. Bill was holding a then 1 year old Will Grey in his arms and while waiting in line to visit with the family, Will Grey suddenly leaned forward and patted the person in front of us on their head. The man turned around thinking some adult was trying to get his attention...and we all did a **double take**. The man was surprised to learn a small child – not an adult – was the owner of the hand that patted him on the head and we were surprised to learn that Will Grey had just patted Tommy Bowden on the head!

Double takes – they are something that stops you in midstream and makes you take another look. They are often accompanied by the words, “What!” or “Did I really see that” – or in our case this morning, “Did I hear her correctly?” Did you find yourself thinking “wait a minute” when you heard our Scripture of the soap opera life of King Herod and his family ending with the head of John the beloved prophet served on a platter? Yes – if any situation causes a double take, this may be it! Mark is using this shocking story to encourage us to stop, slow down and look again at what might really be happening.

We’ve been hearing Scripture from the gospel of Mark for the past few weeks. We have studied how Jesus calmed a storm, healed someone believed to be possessed with demons, healed the hemorrhaging woman, resurrected a child, preached and was rejected by those in his home town, and in the text immediately preceding today’s, sent the disciples out far and wide to be among the people healing, anointing and casting out demons all in the name of God. It seems quite random to have John’s beheading here and quite startling to have such a gruesome tale. After all we were busy learning about the miracles of Jesus and then “poof” we’re back on John the Baptist.

If your attention span is anything like mine, you were probably so focused on the events of the beheading that you missed the first two verses. Or maybe you heard them but they were quickly overshadowed by the latter or perhaps you heard them but they made no sense – “King Herod heard of it, for Jesus name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

Evidently during Jesus’ time, there were three theories floating around about the identity of Jesus. One made the connection that Jesus was the beloved prophet Elijah. Elijah, the prophet who revived a widow’s dead son; He is the prophet hears God voice in the sheer silence while up on the mountain. He is the prophet who passes his mantle on to Elisha then ascends to heaven in a

chariot. Elijah was and still is considered the greatest of prophets by the Jewish people and it was believed he would return to life as the forerunner to the Messiah.<sup>1</sup>

Others thought that Jesus was “a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” Prophets were chosen, prepared, and called by God.<sup>2</sup> While no specific name are given in conjunction with the “prophets of old”, we can assume people were making connections to various prophets: Jonah who fled when called by God only to be swallowed by a big fish, spit up, and ultimately returned to prophesy to the people of Ninevah to change their ways, Isaiah who prophesied to a non-believing crowd about the impending fall of Judah, and then in the midst of great ruin, shared God’s promise of compassion and the Israelites return to greatness. Jeremiah the prophet who reminds us that even in the midst of deep despair and desolation, God is with Israel working to heal the wounded body and spirit. It is in this company of prophets that some thought Jesus fell.

Finally, there are people, Herod included, who think Jesus just may be John the Baptizer raised from the dead. Ancients believed that soul of a person who had met a violent death became a powerful “control” in the spirit world; therefore Jesus was either John come back to life or else was in league with John’s powerful spirit enabling him to perform mighty works – like healing and reviving people.<sup>3</sup> This idea coupled with the gruesome story of John’s violent death seems to make the case for Herod’s argument that Jesus just might be John risen again.

In these two short, seemingly insignificant verses, the gospel writer shows people are trying to figure out exactly who is Jesus? But in their efforts to answer the question, they are missing the mark.

Their comparisons of Jesus to Elijah and John and prophets of old are quite complimentary and flattering, but doing so places Jesus into an already existing, familiar category and doesn’t begin to capture who he really is.

If you’ve ever watched a TV show on organization, organizers go into a house full of “clutter” and force the homeowners to sort everything into one of three categories – trash, donate, keep. The idea is fewer choices forces you to put everything in a category. It’s great for cleaning out your closets but we tend to put that same thinking into other areas of our lives as well. We categorize the people we know – work friends, school friends, children’s friends, church friends, immediate family, extended family, friends that are like family. Society lumps us into categories – we even lump people we don’t know into categories – LeBron James is currently referred to as the next Michael Jordan; Clemson University is sometimes referred to as the Harvard of the South; and I know we are already on the look out for the next Michael Jackson.

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, William. The Gospel of Mark: The Daily Study Bible Series. Westminster Press, 1975. Page 147.

<sup>2</sup> Gehem, Henry Snyder. The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible. Westminster Press, 1974, page 766.

<sup>3</sup> Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Matthew Mark. Abingdon Press, 1978. pg 733.

Maybe you're thinking...who wouldn't want to be compared to Michael Jordan. He's an amazing basketball star who raised the bar to extreme levels; what University wouldn't want to be compared to Harvard the oldest and arguably most prestigious University in the nation; and if someone thought my singing was half as good as Michael Jackson I'd be a true rock star. But categorizing people and things in this way often sells short the ability of the one who is being lumped into these categories.

The beauty of this labeling or categorizing is that it is easy and doesn't take a lot of thought. But labeling others often means we miss out. When we meet people and reduce them to these categories, we think that because we know the category, we know the individual within that category. That is unfair and untrue.

By placing this seemingly obscure break in the story of Jesus' ministry, Mark is not only beginning to challenge preconceived ideas of Jesus...but trying to help the readers stop and look again at the question, just who is Jesus?

But we are reading this with 2000 years of hindsight and we know who Jesus is. We know Jesus is not Elijah, we know that he is more than a prophet; and we know Jesus is not John the Baptist. We know Jesus came preaching and teaching about the unconditional grace and love of God for all; we know God poured himself out in Jesus to embody that love, endured pain, suffering and death out of that love, was raised again out of that love and continues through that love in the work of the Holy Spirit. We are 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians who study who Jesus is...we know Jesus...don't we?

I am reminded of the ancient story about six blind men who were asked to determine what an elephant looked like by feeling different parts of the elephant's body.

The blind man who feels a leg says the elephant is like a pillar; the one who feels the tail says the elephant is like a rope; the one who feels the trunk says the elephant is like a tree branch; the one who feels the ear says the elephant is like a hand fan; the one who feels the belly says the elephant is like a wall; and the one who feels the tusk says the elephant is like a solid pipe.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind\\_men\\_and\\_an\\_elephant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_men_and_an_elephant)

Each man spoke honestly about what he believed he was feeling and each of those descriptions were quite different. Yet all six men were describing the same thing...the elephant.

My hunch is if I asked each of you to answer the question who is Jesus? we'd get varied responses like in the elephant story - and if we opened that question up to the community outside these walls the answer would change exponentially. Some might focus on Jesus as Savior; others might identify with Jesus as friend; some might be more comfortable with Teacher; I bet you'd hear someone say moral leader; definitely hear someone say prophet; some might say Healer; some good Presbyterian might say Jesus is one part or rather person

of the Godhead called the Trinity; some might even think of Jesus as the cosmic Santa Claus who gives you everything you ask for. And these are just a few of what I think we might hear...

But my point is this – when those describing the elephant put all of their descriptions together, they got a clearer picture of the elephant. Likewise, when we join together in answering the question “Who is Jesus” we find a clearer and more complete picture of God. Even when we include those perspectives that make you roll your eyes and shake your head. Does this mean we are a denomination where “everything anyone thinks about Jesus is right”? No – but it does mean we are called to listen to each other and weigh differing ideas about Jesus trusting that the Holy Spirit will guide us in discernment. It is this understanding that promotes why we study together, why we worship together, why we do ministry together. For we can learn about Jesus on our own but doing so we run the risk of creating a significantly limited and incomplete picture of Jesus.

So what is Mark trying to say about who Jesus is? He seems to be saying that ‘Jesus is more than Elijah, more than the prophets of old, more than John the Baptist’ but to find out you can’t just take just one look at Jesus and think you are done. The life of a disciple means you, with the help of others, need to stop and look at Jesus again and again and again...and when you do, may you be blessed to find that each and every time you get one step closer to the answer, Who is Jesus?

In the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.