

Story and Meditation: Bad Days

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Amos 7:7-15

Mark 6:14-29

by Eric Anderson

I don't think many of the 'apapane do this, but up in the ohī'a forest, some generations of the birds had selected a family tree. Who chose it was lost in the mists of time. Even the family stories failed to remember. The tree was tall, festooned with branches, and rose from a broad trunk and spreading roots. The birds had plenty of room for nests here and there in the foliage. Children built their new nests not far from where their parents' nests swayed gently in the breeze.

Until the storm.

As far as the birds were concerned, the storm swept in without warning. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled. The winds roared through the forest, accompanied by the crashing sounds of breaking branches and falling limbs. And then, suddenly, unimaginably, the great tree was leaning, and then bending, and then hurtling to the ground.

The birds scattered to other trees and waited out the long, terrible, stormy night.

When light returned to the forest, no longer closed away by clouds, the 'apapane gazed down from the neighboring trees at the scarred forest floor. There were many in tears.

There were also many who couldn't imagine what they'd do. The family tree had been the family tree all their lives. It had been the family tree for generations before them. What to do? What to do?

It was one of the older, though not the oldest, of the 'apapane who spoke first. "I raised all my chicks in this tree." Those chicks, now adults themselves, nodded.

"I raised all my chicks in this tree," said another. "I raised all my chicks in this tree." Over and over again, the parents and grandparents and great-grandparents said the words of remembrance and of sorrow.

"I learned to fly from this tree," said a younger 'apapane who had not yet built a nest or raised young. "I learned to fly from this tree," said another. "I learned to fly from this tree," they said one after another, and their parents and grandparents said the same.

"This has been our family tree," said the 'apapane who had first spoken, "but it is not our last family tree. It has been our past. We will have a new tree for our future."

The 'apapane were silent for a long time. Then one or two, then five or six, set off looking for the next family tree. The rest sat and sang of memories and of loss, they sang of hope and of the future.

As a writer, our friend Mark did things his own way, in his own style, in a fashion quite recognizable. He liked to tell stories quickly; he was a master of the three to five sentence account of an event. He also liked to fold stories into themselves, to start a story, then take up another story, finish the second story, and go back to complete the first story. He also liked to feature Jesus. Most of the text of his book is specifically about Jesus, what Jesus said, what Jesus did, who Jesus was.

This particular story – the story of the death of John the Baptist – is rather extraordinary in the Gospel of Mark. First of all, Jesus doesn't appear in it except for Herod wondering if he's John the Baptist resurrected. Second, it's long. It's the longest sustained narrative in the Gospel of Mark except for the account of Jesus' last supper, arrest, trial, and crucifixion. It is, however, the center of a folded story. Just before this, Jesus assigned the twelve disciples – his closest friends and students – to move through the Galilean villages teaching and healing, just as he was doing. After Mark finished this story of John the Baptist's execution, the twelve apostles returned, describing their successes. The entire group then headed off at Jesus' invitation: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." They needed rest. They needed to grieve for John the Baptist.

Rather like the 'apapane looking down at the fallen tree.

Unlike the storm that brought down the family tree, John the Baptist was brought down by human storms. Mark was not the only first century writer to comment on John's fatal encounter with Herod. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote an account toward the end of the first century. It may surprise you to find that both writers, Mark and Josephus, identify Herod's marriage to Herodias as the primary source of the conflict between the Baptist and the monarch. Josephus either did not know or chose not to tell the story about Herodias' and her daughter's manipulation of Herod. Instead, he wrote: "Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise rebellion: (for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise:) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause; and not bring himself into difficulties by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late."

Why was John, and presumably Jesus, unhappy about Herod's marriage? Emerson Powery writes at Working Preacher, "Not only did John's message meet with political obstacles, so would Jesus' and so would his followers' (cf. Mark 13). John's declaration of the unlawfulness of Herod's marriage to Herodias would probably have been shared by Jesus as well (cf. Mark 10). In addition, marriages of this type already had huge political implications attached to them." Herodias had been married: to Herod's half brother, who was also, confusingly, named Herod, and yes, I wish the Herod family had been more creative about names, too. Herod – this Herod

– had also been married to someone else, a woman named Phasaelis, and he divorced her when he decided to marry Herodias. This double betrayal angered Phasaelis' father, the ruler of Nabatea, who defeated Herod's army in around the year 36. John the Baptist was not the only one to die because of this questionable marriage. It brought all the horrors of war.

The execution of John was a bad day that set in motion a series of bad days for many more people than John and his supporters and friends. Herod and Herodias, by the way, would eventually end up exiled to Spain, suspected of plotting against the Roman Emperor Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, better known by the nickname "little boots" or Caligula.

But what are we to make of this long story stuck in the middle of Mark's Gospel of few words? Why did Mark think it so important that we know this story? To what did he compare it?

C. Clifton Black writes at Working Preacher, "Herod's banquet is only the first of two in Mark 6. Jesus hosts the second, in the middle of nowhere for thousands of nobodies with nothing to offer save five loaves and two fish. At that feast greed and fear have no place. There all are fed to the full, with leftovers beyond comprehension (6:30-44)."

When Jesus and his disciples sought needed rest and comfort after John's execution and their teaching and healing labors, they were followed by a group Mark numbered at five thousand people. Jesus had the compassion to greet them and teach them. Then he fed them with that miracle we call the one of loaves and fishes (that story comes up a couple weeks from now). Jesus brought wisdom, generosity, and fulfillment to a banquet filled with uninvited guests. Herod, now... Well...

As Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "...what happens in the aftermath of Herod's birthday party is the testing of the tetrarch. The testing of his character, his loyalties, his mind, his heart. The testing of his commitment to something costlier than the status quo.

"How different the story would be if Herod passed this test. But he doesn't. He fails. When push comes to shove, his casual fascination with the truth isn't enough to transform him. He remains a hearer of the good news — not a doer."

Jesus' disciples, in contrast, though skeptical and puzzled, followed Jesus' instructions to collect food and get the people to sit down for a meal. They passed out the multiplying bread and fish, no doubt with their eyes popping and their jaws hanging open, but they did it. Herod made a wild promise and refused to abandon it, hubris overcoming justice. The disciples started by telling Jesus to send the crowd away for their meal, but when Jesus set a new direction, they abandoned their earlier position. They heard the good news and they did it.

Jesus took the bad day of John's execution and made the effort to work from it, to grieve for it, but also to transform it. Mark wrote that Jesus "had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" – Herod had just conclusively demonstrated that their ruler, their shepherd, had very little compassion for them at all.

That's the direction, I hope, for our bad days, and heaven knows we have had more than enough. Our bad days call for grieving, for sorrow, for mourning. They call for recognition that something we loved and relied on is gone. They require us to look at life in a different way, with different resources, with different possibilities.

Our bad days also invite us to transform the time. To seek out a new family tree, as it were, or to demonstrate that what we have endured need not be the way of the future. Bad days offer us the opportunity to demonstrate better ways of doing and being. Bad days can become good days, not by lying about the past, but by setting a better direction for the future.

Amen.