

The Best Christmas Ever

Advent Through Epiphany Devotional – Week 4

The Church of St. John the Divine - Adult Education

* Bible quotations taken from the NIV on <http://www.biblegateway.com/>

THE DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

The Death of John the Baptist

Read Matthew 11: 2-19, 14: 3-13; Mark 6: 14-29; and Luke 3: 19-20 and 7: 18-35. What strikes you initially about the death of John the Baptist?

Matthew 11: 2-19, 14: 3-13

² When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

⁴ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy^[b] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

⁷ As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.”^[c]

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he...

³ Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, ⁴ for John had been saying to him: “It is not lawful for you to have her.” ⁵ Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet.

⁶ On Herod’s birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much ⁷ that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. ⁸ Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” ⁹ The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted ¹⁰ and had John

beheaded in the prison. ¹¹ His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. ¹² John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.

Mark 6: 14-29

¹⁴ King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, ^[b] "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

¹⁵ Others said, "He is Elijah."

And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago."

¹⁶ But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!"

¹⁷ For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. ¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹ So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, ²⁰ because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled ^[c]; yet he liked to listen to him.

²¹ Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. ²² When the daughter of ^[d] Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

The king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." ²³ And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?"

"The head of John the Baptist," she answered.

²⁵ At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: "I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

²⁶ The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷ So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, ²⁸ and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. ²⁹ On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Luke 3: 19-20 & 7: 18-35

¹⁹ But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, ²⁰ Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison... ¹⁸ John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, ¹⁹ he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

²⁰ When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'"

²¹ At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. ²² So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy^[a] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ²³ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

²⁴ After John's messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ²⁵ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. ²⁶ But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷ This is the one about whom it is written:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you."^[b]

²⁸ I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

²⁹ (All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. ³⁰ But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.)

³¹ Jesus went on to say, "To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? ³² They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other:

"We played the pipe for you,
and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge,
and you did not cry."

³³ For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' ³⁴ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' ³⁵ But wisdom is proved right by all her children."

What struck me particularly were the parallels between John the Baptist & Jesus' executions and the circumstances preceding them.

- *Both John the Baptist & Jesus spoke out against evil practices*
- *Both were hated & plotted against in retaliation (Herod & Herodias; the Jewish officials)*
- *In both cases, the official in charge did not want to carry out the execution and felt pressured by the force of the mob reaction (Herod; Pontius Pilate – see Matthew 27: 15-24)*

¹⁵ Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. ¹⁶ At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus ^[b] Barabbas. ¹⁷ So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" ¹⁸ For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

¹⁹ While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

²⁰ But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

²¹ "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor.

"Barabbas," they answered.

²² "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked.

They all answered, "Crucify him!"

²³ "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

²⁴ When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"

The main contrast between their executions was that John the Baptist's body was desecrated (beheaded then remaining body buried incomplete) whereas, in accordance with prophecy, Jesus' body was intact and His bones were not even broken as was typical to speed the dying process during crucifixion (see Psalm 34: 19-21 and John 19: 35-36).

Psalm 34: 19-21

¹⁹ The righteous person may have many troubles,
but the LORD delivers him from them all;

²⁰ he protects all his bones,
not one of them will be broken.

²¹ Evil will slay the wicked;
the foes of the righteous will be condemned.

John 19: 35-36

³⁵ The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. ³⁶ These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken,”

According to Matthew 14: 3-4, Mark 6: 17-20, and Luke 3: 19-20, why was John the Baptist locked in prison? How do we know when we should and should not speak out against injustice and immorality?

Matthew 14: 3-4

³ Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, ⁴ for John had been saying to him: “It is not lawful for you to have her.”

Mark 6: 17-20

¹⁷ For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, whom he had married. ¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” ¹⁹ So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, ²⁰ because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled^[1]; yet he liked to listen to him.

Luke 3: 19-20

¹⁹ But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, ²⁰ Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

John the Baptist was imprisoned because he spoke out against Herod taking his brother Philip’s wife Herodias, who was also Herod’s niece. Ideally, we should always speak out against injustice and immorality when it is encountered. In reality, at times, we all feel inhibited about taking action out of a sense of fear or self-preservation. We may keep silent merely to protect our reputation/other people’s opinion. But it could be that we keep silent to protect our lives or the lives/safety of others. It is easy to demonstrate courage when we live in a country dedicated to free speech. But think of those citizens who suffered under regimes like the Nazis or the Communists of the USSR & Red China. Would we be so brave in the face of being eliminated or having our families tortured for speaking truth publicly?

The Herod in this story is not Herod the Great, the king of Judea at the time of the birth of Christ. This Herod is Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great. At the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C., his kingdom was divided among his three sons. Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39. He is the Herod before whom Jesus appeared just before His crucifixion in Luke 23: 6-12. This is also the Herod whom Jesus called “that fox” in Luke 13:32. Why does Jesus call him a fox?

Luke 23: 6-12

⁶ On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. ⁷ When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.

⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort. ⁹ He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹ Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. ¹² That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies.

Luke 13:32

³¹ At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you."

³² He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.'"

Foxes today are a symbol of craftiness. This image may be appropriate for Herod. But Jesus, prior to entering Jerusalem for the Passover, calls Herod a fox because in Biblical times a fox was a symbol for destruction. In the Song of Solomon, it says:

¹⁵ Catch for us the foxes,
the little foxes
that ruin the vineyards,
our vineyards that are in bloom.

I am sure that Jesus knew in advance the role that Herod was to play at His crucifixion.

Observe Herod Antipas in Luke 23: 6-12. Why do you think that Jesus refused to answer his questions? What was behind Herod's dressing of Jesus in splendid clothing?

Luke 23: 6-12

⁶ On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. ⁷ When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.

⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort. ⁹ He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹ Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. ¹² That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies.

Herod had been hoping to enjoy his own personal magic show, seeing Jesus perform some miracle (Luke 23:8). Herod enjoyed being entertained by prodding fervent preachers into impassioned speeches. Recall his enjoyment in listening to John the Baptist in Mark 6:19-20. I imagine Herod's perverse enjoyment might've been similar to children who like to poke sticks at animals stuck in a cage then snicker when the trapped creature starts hissing & swatting at the stick. But frustrating Herod by not playing along would be a lowly motivation to the Christ. I think rather that Jesus remained silent in fulfillment of prophecy (Isaiah 53:7):

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

This same passage was discussed by Jesus' disciple Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. Their conversation led to the man's miraculous conversion & eventual establishment of the Christian Church in Ethiopia. This meeting & its consequences were also the fulfillment of prophecy (Psalm 68:31).

The motivation behind the royal robe placed on Jesus was to make a mocking gesture. Jesus was, at this time, rumored to be the Messiah, 'the King of the Jews'. 'King of the Jews' happened to be Herod Antipas' official title conferred by Rome as a local ethnic figurehead. In Luke 23:1-3, Jesus affirms this title before the governor Pilate prior to being sent to Herod. Pilate does not take this statement as a threat to Roman rule though because he believes the controversy surrounding Jesus to be merely a local religious dispute (see John 18: 28-40). After appearing before Herod, Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate for execution. But Herod thought dressing Jesus in an old royal robe would be a funny joke between him & Pilate; the two men became friends over this prank.

Mark 6:19-20

¹⁹ So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, ²⁰ because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled^[a]; yet he liked to listen to him.

Acts 8: 26-39

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian^[a] eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

³¹ "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

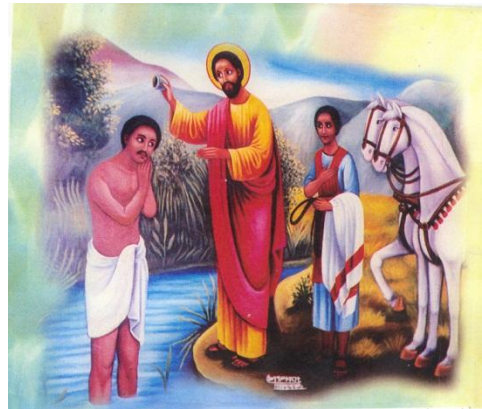
³² This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.”^[b]

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

³⁶ As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” ^[37] ^[c] ³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.



<http://www.kidusmichael.com/EthiopianChristianity.htm>

Luke 23: 1-3

¹ Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. ² And they began to accuse him, saying, “We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king.”

³ So Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

“You have said so,” Jesus replied.

Psalms 68:31

Envoys will come out of Egypt; Ethiopia [aka Cush] will quickly stretch out her hands to God

John 18: 28-40

²⁸ Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹ So Pilate came out to them and asked, “What charges are you bringing against this man?”

³⁰ “If he were not a criminal,” they replied, “we would not have handed him over to you.”

³¹ Pilate said, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.”

“But we have no right to execute anyone,” they objected. ³² This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.

³³ Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

³⁴ “Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?”

³⁵ “Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?”

³⁶ Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

³⁷ “You are a king, then!” said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

³⁸ “What is truth?” retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him. ³⁹ But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release ‘the king of the Jews’?”

⁴⁰ They shouted back, “No, not him! Give us Barabbas!” Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.

The wife of Herod Antipas, Herodias, was also his niece. Before their marriage, Herodias was married to his half-brother, Philip. Herod Antipas persuaded Herodias to leave Philip and marry him. According to Leviticus 18:16, why was this wrong?

Leviticus 18:16

¹⁶ “Do not have sexual relations with your brother’s wife; that would dishonor your brother.

Leviticus 18:16 says that a union with one’s brother’s wife dishonors one’s brother. See also Leviticus 18:3-6 & 20:21. The Lord commanded the Israelites to obey His decrees & laws to set the people apart

from other ethnic groups surrounding them and to have life [‘eternal’ implied see Psalm 119, especially verse 44].

Leviticus 18:3-6

³ You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. ⁴ You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. ⁵ Keep my decrees and laws, for the person who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD. ⁶ “No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. I am the LORD.

Leviticus 20:21

²¹ “If a man marries his brother’s wife, it is an act of impurity; he has dishonored his brother. They will be childless.

Psalm 119:44

⁴⁴ I will always obey your law,
for ever and ever.

According to Mark 6:19, what did Herodias think of John the Baptist and why?

Mark 6:19

¹⁹ So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to,

Herodias wanted John the Baptist dead because he publicly condemned her relationship with her uncle Herod Antipas for whom she left her other uncle/husband Philip [aka Herod Philip & Herod II]. Both uncles were half-brothers & sons of Herod the Great, as was Herodias’ father.

For anyone familiar with a number-line, Herodias is what you might call the ‘negative integer’ of Queen Esther from The Book of Esther; parallel but in a bizzaro/opposite kind of way (Justice League reference ©). Both ladies had power to push forward their agendas with their husbands who were kings. While Queen Esther used her influence with King Xerxes to foil Haman, an evil man who wanted Jews exterminated, and to save her uncle Mordecai & her people, Herodias used her power to have a righteous holy-man of her own religion executed.

What did Herod think of John the Baptist according to Matthew 14:5 and Mark 6:20?

Matthew 14:5

⁵ Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet.

Mark 6:20

²⁰ because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled^[c]; yet he liked to listen to him.

Herod didn't seem to like John the Baptist particularly although he found him interesting to listen too. He was aware that John the Baptist was considered a prophet by many and seemed himself to regard John in that capacity, too. Only fear of mob backlash stayed Herod's hand from killing John & thereby silencing his embarrassing criticisms. But Herod was not such a devout man as to let that regard for John's prophetic status or the fear of mob reaction stop him from beheading John. The execution took place merely so that Herod would not lose face in front of his dinner guests.

Jesus and John the Baptist

As the popularity of John the Baptist increases in the area of Judea close to Jerusalem, Jesus removes Himself to Galilee where He begins a flourishing ministry for about a year and a half. "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." (Matthew 4:23)

It seems that even among the disciples of John there was some misunderstanding as to the identity of Jesus. Read Matthew 9: 14-17, Mark 2: 18-22, and Luke 5: 33-39. Why did Jesus answer their question the way He did? According to Jesus, who is He?

Matthew 9: 14-17

¹⁴ Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"

¹⁵ Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

¹⁶ "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. ¹⁷ Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."

Mark 2: 18-22

¹⁸ Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"

¹⁹ Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. ²⁰ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

²¹ "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. ²² And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins."

Luke 5: 33-39

³³ They said to him, “John’s disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.”

³⁴ Jesus answered, “Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? ³⁵ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast.”

³⁶ He told them this parable: “No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. ³⁷ And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. ³⁸ No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. ³⁹ And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better.’”

Jesus refers to Himself as the bridegroom [whose bride is the Church, implied]. Why He does this is explained very nicely in this excerpt from a larger discussion from the following website, who in turn excerpted it from Return to God Magazine, Volume 1 Number 2:
<http://www.harvardhouse.com/prophetictech/new/wedding.htm> (don't know about the content from the rest of the site's other articles but this bit was very good in delving into the historical context of Jesus' analogy)

ANCIENT WEDDING PRACTICE: MARRIAGE COVENANT AND BRIDE PRICE

When a young man desired to marry a young woman in ancient Israel, he would prepare a contract or covenant to present to the young woman and her father at the young woman's home. The contract showed his willingness to provide for the young woman and described the terms under which he would propose marriage. The most important part of the contract was the bride price, the price that the young man was willing to pay to marry the young woman. This payment was to be made to the young woman's father in exchange for his permission to marry. The bride price was generally quite high. Sons were considered to be more valuable than daughters since they were physically more able to share in the work of farming and other heavy labor. The bride price compensated the young woman's family for the cost to raise a daughter and also indicated the love that the young man had for the young woman -- the young woman was very valuable to the young man! The young man would go to the young woman's house with the contract and present his offer to the young woman and her father.

JESUS' FULFILLMENT: MARRIAGE COVENANT AND BRIDE PRICE

Jesus came to the home of His bride (earth) to present His marriage contract. The marriage contract provided by Jesus is the new covenant, which provides for the forgiveness of sins of God's people. Jesus paid the bride price with His life. At the last supper, when breaking bread, He spoke of the price He was paying: "...This is my body given for you..." ([Luke 22:20](#)). [Hebrews 8:15](#) makes it clear that Jesus died as the price for the new covenant: "...Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance -- now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant." Other Scripture references include [1 Corinthians 6:19-20](#), [1 Peter 1:18-19](#), [Acts 20:28](#) and [John 3:29](#). The marriage contract, the new covenant, is described throughout Scripture: "...This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on

their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." ([Jeremiah 31:31-34](#)).

Read Matthew 11: 2-19 and Luke 7:18-35. John the Baptist sends a delegation to Jesus from his prison. What is his question and what is the answer from Jesus?

How does Jesus describe John the Baptist? What strikes you about this description?

Matthew 11: 2-19

² When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

⁴ Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy^[b] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

⁷ As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you."^[c]

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence,^[d] and violent people have been raiding it. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. ¹⁴ And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. ¹⁵ Whoever has ears, let them hear.

¹⁶ "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

¹⁷ "'We played the pipe for you,
and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge,
and you did not mourn.'

¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' ¹⁹ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her deeds."

Luke 7:18-35

¹⁸ John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, ¹⁹ he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

²⁰ When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'"

²¹ At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. ²² So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy^[a] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ²³ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

²⁴ After John's messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ²⁵ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. ²⁶ But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷ This is the one about whom it is written:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you."^[b]

²⁸ I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

²⁹ (All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. ³⁰ But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.)

³¹ Jesus went on to say, "To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? ³² They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other:

"We played the pipe for you,
and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge,
and you did not cry."

³³ For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.'³⁴ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'³⁵ But wisdom is proved right by all her children."

John the Baptist asked Jesus whether He was 'he that was to come' aka the Messiah. Many commentary authors suggest that although John recognized Jesus as the Messiah, under the force of privations he was suffering in prison and under the common misconception that the Messiah would bring about a political revolution, John became weary & downtrodden but not faithless and so turned to Jesus for

reassurance. Jesus' response was veiled in the language of prophecy from the Old Testament. He gives a litany of miracles to report back to John, who would have understood that Jesus was affirming His status as the Messiah as foretold in Isaiah 35 especially verses 5-6. It would have been a comforting message since these miracles indicate the presence and power of God at work. Notice too that Jesus tells the crowds that John the Baptist was the one "who will prepare your way before you (Mt 11:10 & Lk 7:27)" (see Isaiah 35: 8-10). Jesus also says about John the Baptist, "he is the Elijah who was to come (Mt 11:14)." This is a reference to Malachi 4:5.

Isaiah 35: 4-10

⁴ say to those with fearful hearts,
"Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you."

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.

⁷ The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

⁸ And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.

The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.

⁹ No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.

But only the redeemed will walk there,

¹⁰ and those the LORD has rescued will return.

They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Malachi 4: 5-6

⁵ “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”

How and why does Jesus indict the people who were not responding to either Him or John the Baptist?

Jesus compares those who were unresponsive to His and to John’s call to repentance to petulant children calling out disrespectfully in the marketplace. In contrast, Jesus discusses “Wisdom’s children”; these are the followers of John the Baptist and Jesus who demonstrated changed lives, worked miracles, and spread the Gospel like wildfire over the entire known world. Those who resisted John the Baptist’s and Jesus’ message also denied the authority (God) attested to by the miracles worked by both of them and their followers. Recall the story of the man blind from birth who was healed on the Sabbath (John 9: 13-33, especially verses 30-33).

John 9: 13-33

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. ¹⁴ Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath. ¹⁵ Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. “He put mud on my eyes,” the man replied, “and I washed, and now I see.”

¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.”

But others asked, “How can a sinner perform such signs?” So they were divided.

¹⁷ Then they turned again to the blind man, “What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.”

The man replied, “He is a prophet.”

¹⁸ They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man’s parents. ¹⁹ “Is this your son?” they asked. “Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?”

²⁰ “We know he is our son,” the parents answered, “and we know he was born blind. ²¹ But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don’t know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself.” ²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³ That was why his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

²⁴ A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. “Give glory to God by telling the truth,” they said. “We know this man is a sinner.”

²⁵ He replied, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”

²⁶ Then they asked him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

²⁷ He answered, “I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?”

²⁸ Then they hurled insults at him and said, “You are this fellow’s disciple! We are disciples of Moses! ²⁹ We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don’t even know where he comes from.”

³⁰ The man answered, “Now that is remarkable! You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. ³² Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

Herod & John the Baptist

Read Matthew 14: 6-13 and Mark 6: 21-29.

Matthew 14: 6-14, 23

⁶ On Herod’s birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much ⁷ that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. ⁸ Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” ⁹ The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted ¹⁰ and had John beheaded in the prison. ¹¹ His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. ¹² John’s disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick... ²³ After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone

Mark 6: 21-29

²¹ Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. ²² When the daughter of ^[d] Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

The king said to the girl, “Ask me for anything you want, and I’ll give it to you.” ²³ And he promised her with an oath, “Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.”

²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?”

“The head of John the Baptist,” she answered.

²⁵ At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: “I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

²⁶ The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷ So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, ²⁸ and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. ²⁹ On hearing of this, John’s disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

List the events that precipitated the death of John the Baptist:

- *Herod’s birthday*
- *Herod held a dinner party for important guests*
- *Herodias’ daughter danced for Herod & his guests*
- *Everyone pleased with performance*
- *Herod promised Herodias’ daughter anything she wanted up to half his kingdom*
- *Herodias’ daughter consulted with her mother what she should ask for*
- *Her mother sent her to Herod to ask for John the Baptist’s head on a platter immediately*
- *Because Herod had made the oaths in front of so many guests, he ordered the execution although he really didn’t want to do it*

See if you can find a verse that gives the reasons that Herod ordered the execution of John the Baptist.

Mt 14:9 & Mk 6:26

From Matthew 14: 12-14 and 14:23, what was the reaction of Jesus when he learned of the death of John the Baptist?

Jesus withdrew into seclusion to pray. When the crowds followed Him, He ministered to their needs then went again into seclusion.

How does the example of Jesus mourning for his friend encourage you?

During His earthly life, Jesus prayed for His friends. Jesus is now our intercessor with the Father in Heaven & continues to pray for us.

As you consider Jesus’ response to the death of His “Best Man”, how could His earlier words about John have encouraged the disciples of John the Baptist? “And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me.” (Matthew 11:6)

Matthew 11: 2-6

² When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

⁴ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy^[b] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

I think the commentary whose reasoning most speaks to me is Matthew Henry's on <http://bible.cc/matthew/11-6.htm> . He contends that John the Baptist sent his faithful disciples, not to bolster his own faith under trial during his imprisonment, but rather to inspire his disciples to turn to Jesus, knowing He was the true Messiah. When Jesus made the remark about stumbling, He was perhaps alluding to their unswerving loyalty to John and their resentment that Jesus had been drawing John's followers & baptizing many more people (John 3: 22-30). Jesus nudges John's disciples to recall Isaiah 35 after they witness His works of healing, which were to be the hallmark of the Messiah (see previous for Isaiah 35 quotation).

John 3: 22-30

²² After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. ²³ Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. ²⁴ (This was before John was put in prison.) ²⁵ An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. ²⁶ They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.”

²⁷ To this John replied, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’ ²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less.”

Notice the reaction of Herod to the ascending ministry of Jesus in Matthew 14: 1-2. What does Herod mean when he says that Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead?

Matthew 14: 1-2

¹ At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, ² and he said to his attendants, “This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him.”

Evidently, Herod Antipas was a superstitious individual who held pagan beliefs although he was ethnically part Jewish and religiously a non-observant Jew. Herod knew that John the Baptist was a holy man, yet he carried out John's execution for very trivial reasons. Herod's remark reveals some guilt over John's execution and dread that John has come back to continue to plague him.