

The Death of John



*Matthew 11:2-11,14:1-12;
Mark 6:14-29; Luke 7:18-28*
Year A Advent 3 ; Year B
Proper 10 (Revised)

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3	4
▲	Herod -ruler of the region driven nearly mad by the dilemma of what to do with John, and by what he was eventually tricked into doing	▲			
▲	Advisor1 - an advisor of Herod's who genuinely seeks the good of the nation	▲			▲
▲	Advisor2 - an advisor of Herod's who's more concerned with keeping power	▲			▲
■	Judas - the leader of John's disciples, who later joins Jesus		▲	▲	■
●	Phillip - a former disciple of John's who now serves Jesus		▲		
●	Andrew - a former disciple of John's who now serves Jesus		▲		
▲	Jesus		●	▲	
●	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)			●	

Scene 1

Advisor1 , Advisor2 , Herod

{This play moves backward in time. This first scene takes place in Herod's palace, a couple of months after he had John the Baptist killed.}

Herod *[frantically]* It's him, I tell you! It's him!

Advisor1 *[calmly]* That's impossible, sire. You had him killed. We all saw his head on the platter.

Herod Oh, God! Why did I listen to her? Why did I listen to *him*?

Advisor2 *[sternly]* She did you a favor! And everything worked out the way he said it would.

Herod *[angrily]* She tricked me! And you should never have listened to that

meddler. You should never have let him set foot in the palace! If he had never come to us, we would never have arrested John, and if we had never arrested John...oh, God!

Advisor1 She was only following instructions from her mother. And that "meddler" saved us. He showed us a way to what we had to do but couldn't figure out how to do. If anything, we should offer him a job as a permanent advisor.

Herod He was a devil! Tempting men to sin against God, to kill the prophets of God!

Advisor2 *[rolling his eyes]* Here it comes!

Advisor1 *[in genuine confusion]* Sire, if you believed that John the Baptizer was a true prophet of God, why did we arrest him?

Herod *[grimly]* The world is a dark and terrible place, where a true prophet may still be a danger to the nation, where a traitor may be its savior, and where a king must wrestle with the gods and perhaps doom himself as well.

Advisor2 This is ridiculous! *[to Herod]* You spent way too much time down in the dungeons listening to the rantings of that lunatic!

Advisor1 *[to Advisor2]* Wait, he did what?

Advisor2 I got regular reports from the guards about who came to see him, just to keep track of any other subversives who might contact him, and guess who his number one fan was?

Advisor1 Sire, is this true?

Herod I...liked listening to him. I couldn't stop!

Advisor2 *[in disgust]* So it's just as well we put an end to him.

Herod *[crazily]* But now he's back, don't you see? He's come back from the dead, more powerful than before!

Advisor1 Do you believe the stories of his miracles?

Herod *[hypnotically]* The blind receive their sight. The lame walk. The deaf hear. The sick are healed and the...the dead are raised!

Advisor2 *[coldly]* Sire! You're overwrought. Perhaps you should get some sleep.

Herod *[muttering]* Sleep, yes! A sleep without dreams. A dream without fears. A darkness through which he does not come...

{Herod exits.}

Advisor2 *[disdainfully]* What a mess.

Advisor1 He's been under a lot of pressure. We can't know what it's like.

Advisor2 Sometimes I'm embarrassed that a man like that is our ruler.

Advisor1 Our rulers are only human. They have the same weaknesses we all do. I suppose it's why we're always longing for semi-divine Messiahs.

Advisor2 On that subject, I do agree with the governor on one thing: this Joshua of Nazareth character bears watching.

Advisor1 Yes, he's certainly a resurrection of John in spirit, if not bodily. And his following is just as big, and just as fervent. What do we do if people start saying *he's* the Messiah? Or worse: if *he* starts claiming it? It was pure luck that we were able to suppress John so cleanly.

Advisor2 Nonsense! Now that we've learned how to do it once, we can easily do it again. We just need an inside man like before, and they can always be found.

Scene 2

Andrew , Jesus , Judas , Phillip

{A couple of months earlier, Judas comes running into Jesus' camp.}

Judas *[in panic and grief]* He's dead! He's dead! They killed him!

Phillip Judas! What are you doing here?

Andrew What's happened? Who are you talking about?

Judas The master! They killed him!

Phillip Oh my God! In the prison?

Andrew Are you sure?

Judas I'm sure. He's dead. Murdered! Betrayed.

Jesus We'll not see the like of him again.

Andrew I suppose it was inevitable. I often wondered why they let him live so long.

Judas *[still frantic]* It was *not* inevitable! They weren't suppo - it was in their interest not to kill him!

Jesus *[calmly]* There are many conflicting interests that shape the acts of men.

Judas *[calming suddenly at Jesus' insight]* Yes. That's exactly what happened. It was Herodias who engineered his murder.

Phillip Herod's wife?

Andrew That makes sense. He was arrested for calling their marriage a sin because she was his brother's wife.

Judas Yes, I failed to factor her into - into my thinking about the situation. She pressured Herod every day to kill him, and when that didn't work, she tricked him into promising their daughter a favor, and had it all arranged ahead of time what the daughter would ask.

Phillip This is terrible. What's the group going to do now?

Judas *[bleakly]* Nothing. We buried him, and then every man went his own way. We're dissolved.

Andrew I'm sorry. And I'm sorry we couldn't be there.

Phillip Hey! Why don't you join us? *[to Jesus]* Rabbi, that would okay, wouldn't it? Judas practically ran the whole operation when we were with John. He organized the events and recruited new followers and dealt with the donors and other political groups. There's no way we would have been as successful as we were without him.

Jesus *[carefully to Judas]* I certainly need someone to do for me what you did for John.

Andrew *[to Judas]* What do you say?

Judas *[after a pause, probingly to Jesus]* The master said once that you were the one he was sent to prepare the way for, and that you would be greater than he was.

Jesus No one living is as great as John was. Yet, the smallest child in the Kingdom will be greater than he.

Judas What does that mean? Why aren't you answering my question directly?

Phillip Sorry, but he talks like that all the time!

Andrew *[to Judas]* So did John, as I recall, and you were able to serve *him*.

Judas That sort of ambiguity can be exactly what a crowd needs to hear at times, and it's the perfect way to turn away some operative trying to catch you uttering blasphemy or treason, but I want a straight answer if I'm going to sign on here. *[forcefully to Jesus]* Are you the Messiah?

Jesus *[after a pause]* Come and see!

Scene 3

James , Jesus , Judas

{A month earlier, Jesus is answering questions from a crowd after preaching when Judas and a couple of John's other disciples enter.}

Jesus *[answering a question that was just asked]* What will the Kingdom be like? A great tree sprung from the smallest seed, that grows so big that the birds of the air come to nest in its branches!

{The crowd applauds.}

James All right, everybody. We only have time for one more question.

Judas Here! We bring a question from our master, John the Baptizer, who has recently been thrown into prison.

{The crowd gasps.}

James He's been arrested? Why?

Judas He strayed from his mission of preparing the people for the coming Kingdom and tried to meddle with the politics of the old order. And so he was arrested - for the wrong reasons!

{The crowd murmurs uncertainly.}

James Hold on! Are you saying he messed up somehow?

Judas He could have been a martyr for the Kingdom, but instead, he became merely a victim of the corruption of this world. But it doesn't matter, because he had already said that he was not the One promised us, the One who will lead us to freedom.

Jesus And what would this fallen hero ask of me?

Judas If you are that One! Or if you, too, are only a pretender.

Jesus Go back and simply report to him what everyone sees: The blind receive their sight. The lame walk. The deaf hear. The sick are healed and the dead are raised! Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me!

{Judas and the other two disciples exit.}

Jesus *[to the crowd]* You have just heard it said that John the Baptizer was a reed shaken by the wind. That he was a meddler in palace politics. That he strayed from his mission. But I say to you that among those born of women, there is none greater than he! He was a true prophet, and more than a prophet. He was the one of whom it was written, "Behold I send my messenger before you, to prepare the way!"

{The crowd cheers.}

Jesus You also heard it said that he was no martyr, but I say to you that he was the *first* martyr! For up until John, the prophets only predicted the coming of the Kingdom, but now it is appearing, and the world makes open war against it. Every one of you must choose which army you will march with!

Scene 4

Advisor1 , Advisor2 , Judas

{Two months earlier, in Herod's palace.}

Advisor2 Why should we pay you for anything? We can arrest him any time!

Judas First, I haven't asked for any money. My agenda is the good of the nation, just like yours. Second, you *can't* arrest him any time. If that were true, he would already be in your custody. But you know that an arrest could spark a riot, and perhaps even the open revolt that we're all trying so hard to prevent.

Advisor2 You're a zealot, aren't you? Don't you want a revolt?

Judas I want one that succeeds, led by the true Messiah. My master has already said he isn't the One, and yet, he continues stirring up the people as if he were. It has to stop.

Advisor1 How do you propose managing that?

Judas First, you need a reason for arresting him that won't upset the people so much. It can't be for blasphemy or heresy or treason. It's got to be some little thing the people will half understand. Something that will make them say, "Well, it's too bad, but not surprising. He crossed the line." I can watch for something like that and make sure it's heard by witnesses. Second, you need to catch him when he's alone and unlikely to fight it - his moods fluctuate like crazy these days - so he won't raise a fuss and nobody will see it anyway if he does. And I can watch for a moment like that as well.

Advisor1 [*impressed*] You've thought this out pretty well. To tell you the truth, we were at wit's end over this. But your plan could work.

Advisor2 But what's your price if not money? Some kind of policy concession? The release of other prisoners?

Judas Just this: John is not to be killed.

Advisor2 Out of the question! If you give him up to us, he's ours. To do with what we will!

Advisor1 Actually, it's not such an onerous condition. We won't want to kill him, anyway. If we do manage to arrest him without causing a riot, executing him would just undo all that.

Judas Exactly. You wouldn't even have to keep him imprisoned forever. At some point, the public will forget about him, or forget to feel strongly about him. The next would-be messiah will come along, and he'll be yesterday's news. Then you can let him go to make sure he doesn't inconveniently die while in your hands.

Advisor1 All right. I think we can take this to Herod. We'll let you know his decision.

Advisor2 Hold on. What happens with *you* when this "next would-be messiah" comes along? Are you going to go right back to fomenting revolution?

Judas If I believe he's truly the Messiah, then yes, I'll follow him with all my heart, and do all I can to bury you and your "king" if you try to stand in the way of the nation's liberation.

Advisor2 *[to Advisor1]* You see? He can't be trusted!

Advisor1 Actually, this is exactly why I trust him.

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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