

In her 1985 comic strip, *Dykes to watch out for*, the cartoonist, Alison Bechdel, first introduced what we now know as the Bechdel test: a set of criteria that seeks to measure the representation of women in media. The test has 3 simple parts: to pass, the piece of media needs to have 1) at least 2 women in it, 2) who talk to each other, 3) about something other than a man. The Bechdel test is an imperfect barometer of representation, but it is a useful starting point when engaging with media. Mostly, it is stunning how much of the content we consume does not even come close to passing.

And the Bible is no exception to this trend. You need to scour the Scriptures very closely to find stories that pass the Bechdel test and, even then, most of them just barely fit the bill. Mary and Elizabeth? Close, but they're talking about their babies in utero who are both...male. Ruth and Naomi? Also good candidates - the Book of Ruth features many conversations between these two women, but even they spend a lot of time figuring out how to set Ruth up with Boaz. The truth is, the Bible speaks *about* women plenty, but it rarely lifts up non-male voices. A slim minority of the women mentioned in the Bible actually have names. And Biblical women are often typecast in much the same way the modern media slots women into narrow, one-dimensional tropes - Eve, the temptress; Mary Magdalene the repentant sinner. None of this is especially surprising. The Bible is a product of its time and cultural milieu. It describes a world that was built for and by men, and that had little use for recording the private lives of women. But the Bible, subversive and holy text that it is, also regularly transcends the world it describes, giving us glimpses of a different way of being, a new, divine world being born among us right in the midst of our ordinary, imperfect existence.

In our Gospel reading today, we see the gap between those two worlds, in another story that comes close (but not quite) to passing the Bechdel test. The story of the beheading of John

the Baptist is most certainly not where most people go when they search the Bible for subversive, feminist texts. Herodias and her daughter are not celebrated as Biblical heroines like Ruth, Esther, or Mary. In contrast to the revered “good girls” of the Bible, who follow God’s word and establish themselves as moral exemplars, we have before us today two Biblical “bad girls”. Women who scheme and plot and arrange the murder of a prophet out of their festering resentment. Women whom history casts as villains.

But are they really so bad? Or is that just what we’ve been conditioned, by centuries of patriarchy, to think? Let’s take a closer look. This story, for all its complexity, is a very rare account in the Gospels of 2 women speaking to each other without a man present, and the ONLY instance in the entire Bible of a mother speaking to her daughter (ponder that for a second - I didn’t believe that could be possible when I stumbled across that factoid, but it is true). It is a grisly tale of blame, oppression, and violence. It is a story of desperate, angry women who do what they need to do to survive in a world that isn’t built for them.

The writer of Mark’s Gospel sets the scene: Jesús is doing deeds of power and arousing the suspicion and fear of those in authority, including Herod. The death of John the Baptist is really only included here as a flashback, because Herod hears about Jesús and is paranoid that John, whom he beheaded, has come back to life. Herod had John arrested and imprisoned on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. John had (correctly) told Herod that it wasn’t lawful for him to marry his brother’s wife *while his brother was still living*. And so, we’re told, *Herodias* (interestingly, not Herod) holds a grudge against John, wants to kill him, but can’t. Whoa. Let’s stop there for a moment.

Who is at fault here? Is it really Herodias who, oh, by the way, doesn’t even really have her own name but is referred to as a derivative, a possession of her powerful husband? Or is it

the oppressive force of misogyny that allows Herodias to be handled like a trading card, shuttled around between powerful husbands with no say in the matter, only to then be accused by a sharp-tongued prophet of violating religious law? If you were Herodias, wouldn't you be annoyed too? Is she really the deserving target of John the Baptist's ire?

Fast forward - Herod throws himself a birthday party, a lavish and probably debaucherous celebration. If we read between the lines, we can infer that his wife and daughter (who is *also* called Herodias - take note, even royal women are lumped together into one, indistinguishable, subservient category) weren't invited. They lurk in the wings until Herod calls for his daughter and asks her to dance for his guests. This is not a cute, innocent, or voluntary dance - this is a forced dance of oppression and abuse, the objectification of a child to satisfy the appetites of powerful men. In works of art as well as in theology, Herodias is depicted as a morally depraved, promiscuous temptress but, here again, we must ask ourselves - who really deserves the blame? Is it the child? Or is it the people who forced her to dance in the first place? We might think the answer should be obvious, but a closer look at our world today reminds us of how much easier it is to place blame on the victim than to face pernicious systems of oppression head on - the sky high juvenile incarceration rates of BIPOC children in our country and the continued detention of migrant children at our border speak for themselves.

But this dance, fraught though it is, brings an unexpected opportunity. Herodias' performance pleases Herod, who, suddenly overcome with emotion, beckons his daughter to come close and offers her anything her heart desires, up to half his kingdom. It is a ludicrous proposition, illustrative of Herod's capriciousness - what would this oppressed child, who doesn't even have her own name, do with half a kingdom?

But Herodias is savvy. She sees Herod's offer for what it is - a Golden ticket - and runs to consult her mother on how to best leverage it. And, of all the things they could have asked for, they request the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Why? Why this? Perhaps it's because, in this deeply imperfect and broken world, this was as close as these women could get to an assertion of freedom. John the Baptist wasn't the real source of Herodias' anger, but perhaps he was the only target she could safely lash out against. Power repressed will eventually find an outlet, healthy or not. Violence begets violence. Realistically, there wasn't much Herodias could have asked for that would have measurably improved her own quality of life and her daughter's. Life inside the palace, miserable though it may have been, still brought more security than life anywhere else. These women were trapped. And trapped people do desperate things.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not condoning what Herodias did. Murder is still murder. There is no turning her into a Biblical heroine. But there is so much more to this story than meets the eye. Grisly and distressing as it is, this tale paints a picture of the world that Jesús came to save - and the oppression that Jesús came to liberate us from. Toppling the thrones of the powerful and lifting up the oppressed. Sweeping away an unjust system where blame is placed on victims while the powerful escape unscathed. Breaking cycles of violence and creating a world where all are free to exercise their own agency. A world where we don't need tests to measure representation because everyone is known to be worthy of their own name, their own voice, and their own story

The portion of the Gospel we read today is not a particularly hopeful chapter, and that's ok. It's one scene of a much broader story of salvation, just as the darkest chapters of our own stories are part of a much bigger narrative tapestry. But, if we want the healing, the new life, the redemption that Jesús offers, we cannot erase the ugly and unflattering bits of our history. We

must bring them to light of God's grace. And we must read these stories - our stories - critically, examining our own complicity, our own tendencies to blame victims and turn a blind eye to oppressors, our own perpetuation of cycles of violence, so that we can begin to welcome in the new world God longs to build in our midst.

Let us pray now, for the coming of that world:

*Just and loving God, grant us the expansiveness of your vision. Where we are quick to assign blame, give us curiosity to look deeper. Where we reduce our fellow human beings to tropes and labels, give us courage to listen to one another's stories. Where we feel constrained by the limitations of this world, give us strength to shatter walls of prejudice and oppression. And hasten the coming of your dream, where every human being may live in dignity. Amen.*