

Mark 6:14-29
Martyrdom: Sacrifices of Love
WRCoB 2.4.24

Open Doors, an organization that tracks
Christian persecution in the world
Published its findings for the year 2023.

What they've found are trends
That are very, very unsettling.

Over the past 30 years
Christian persecution has grown exponentially.

- Globally, more than 360 million Christians suffer at least “high” levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith.
- In 1993, Christians faced high to extreme levels of persecution in 40 countries. This number has nearly doubled to 76 countries in 2023.
- In the top 50 alone, 312 million Christians now face very high or extreme levels of persecution.
- Worldwide, 1 in 7 Christians now experience at least “high” levels of persecution or discrimination; with 1 in 5 in Africa, 2 out of 5 in Asia, and 1 in 15 in Latin America.

According to Open Doors WWL
Nigeria and SSA is a catastrophe in the making.

Seven out of the top 10 most violent places for Christians are in Sub-Saharan Africa. 89 percent of verified incidents where a Christian was killed for their faith occurred in

Nigeria. Violence against Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has reached alarming new levels, as violent Islamic militants destabilize the region using extreme violence.

It is most extreme in Nigeria where militants from the Fulani, Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and others conduct raids on Christian communities, killing, maiming, and kidnapping for ransom or slavery.

- Religiously motivated killings in Nigeria have risen from 4,650 last year to 5,014.
- Hundreds of thousands more have been forced into internal displacement or have become refugees.
- This year has also seen this violence spill over into the southern Christian-majority areas of the nation.
- The jihadist movement seeks to expand Sharia/Islamic law across the continent – with
- severe consequences for the church.
- Nigeria's government continues to deny this is religious persecution, so violations of Christians' rights are carried out with impunity.

As with anything, there are complexities
Associated with identifying faith
As a key factor in persecution

The Open Doors WWL adjusts their findings to include
Climate change, trafficking, tribal conflict
Drought and poverty in their calculations

Globally, the number of Christian persecuted
Outnumber any other faith group including Jews
And there doesn't seem to be an end to it.

Our Scripture Lesson today includes three stories.

The first is Jesus' rejection by members
Of his own home town.

The second, is the sending out of the 12 disciples.

And the third,
The story of the death of John the Baptist.

I've chosen the latter story for our focus today.

If you look closely, you'll discover
That Mark recounts the event

The incident had previously taken place.

It is an ugly story.

In fact, one of the commentators on Working Preacher
Says the title of the story should be

The World's Absolute Worst Birthday Party!

Now, King Herod had married his stepbrother Philip's wife.

Back then, that was a big no-no!

And John the Baptist quickly pounced on it
Publicly criticizing the union
And consequently, found himself in jail for it.

Herod feared John but his wife, Herodias
Hated him and looked for ways
To punish him for his comments.

Herod gave himself a birthday party.

And in front of all to see

The daughter of Herodias danced
And entertained Herod and his guests.

So taken aback was Herod with his step daughter
That he offered up to half his kingdom
As a token of his appreciation.

Rather than accept money or land or power
She went and asked her mother
To which she, without hesitation, said

“The head of John the Baptist”

Mark 6:25 NLT

²⁵ So the girl hurried back to the king and told him, “I want the head of John the Baptist, right now, on a tray!”

What could Herod do
But to send for an executioner
And collect John’s head on a platter.

A gruesome end to John’s life.

A martyr’s death.

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Jesus rejected as a prophet in his home town
John beheaded for speaking out against King Herod

Persecution await those who speak the truth.

Their message is intimidating to those in seats of power.

And history has proven that for Truth-Sayers
Life has not been anything but easy.

John the Baptist followed a long line of biblical martyrs.

Most of the biblical prophets were persecuted for their faith
For challenging the kings and religious authorities

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In some ways, Jesus could be considered
The first martyr of the Christian faith.

The argument against labeling Jesus as martyr
Is that Jesus did not simply die
Because he stood up for his faith

He did do so.

But that a part of God's plan of salvation
Included Jesus' death as an act of reconciliation
Taking upon himself the sins of humanity.

Stephen is considered the first Christian martyr.

You can find his story in the Book of Acts, chapter seven.

Another record of a martyred disciple
Also takes place in the Book of Acts, chapter 12.

Acts 12:1-2 CEV

12 At that time King Herod caused terrible suffering for some members of the church. ² He ordered soldiers to cut off the head of James, the brother of John.

You remember James and John, the sons of Zebedee.

They along with Peter and his brother Andrew
Were the first four disciples Jesus called.

History has it, Peter and Paul were martyred circa 66 AD

Paul was beheaded
And Peter crucified upside down.

In fact, of all the original disciples
It is said that only John, the Beloved
Escaped a martyr's death.

Until 325 AD, when the Emperor Constantine
Made Christianity the state religion

Christians were fiercely persecuted by the Romans.

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I have in my office library a book entitled

Martyrs Mirror by Thieleman J. van Braght

*The Story of Seventeen Centuries of Christian Martyrdom
From the Time of Christ to A.D. 1660.*

It is an account of the stories of martyrdom
In the first centuries of the Christian movement

Up to and including what is called Anabaptism
Roughly the years 1500 to 1700s.

The book has accounts of thousands of Anabaptists

Being burned at the stake, drowned in the rivers
Beheaded, eyes gouged out

Their properties confiscated
Children removed from their parents

The most horrible kinds of torture and death
Inflicted on them because they chose
To defy the state churches

And rebaptize themselves again as confessing adults
Rather than accept their infant baptism by the state

From an Anabaptist perspective
The presence of persecution or discrimination
Was more the norm in history than not.

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We are blessed to live in relative security
Here in the US
With the ability to freely worship God.

But think about this.

There are people out there who want to kill you
Because you follow the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ.

Rev Dr Rebecca Dali in Nigeria
Was stopped in a roadblock by Jihadists.

They held a knife against her throat
And asked to denounce her faith in Jesus

Not only, did she not do so
But she defiantly said to her would be killers

“If you’re going to kill me for my faith
Go ahead and do so
I am not afraid to die.”

So struck by her boldness, they left her alone.

But more often than not

These confrontations end in martyrdom.

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In January of 2020

An EYN District Executive Rev. Lawan Andimi

Was abducted and held for ransom

By Boko Haram.

The church leadership couldn't raise the amount demanded.

And so, Boko Haram, recording everything on social media

Had an executioner behead Rev Andimi

And sent the video out to news agencies.

I saw the video.

It is seared in my memory.

From one of the news agency's articles.

"Rev. Andimi died a martyr and therefore no doubt a Christian hero," said Para-Mallam. "The blood of martyrs is the seed which waters and grows the gospel of peace as good news to a broken and hurting world which Jesus Christ called us to proclaim."

He left behind a wife and nine children.

Another news agency interviewed his wife.

Our faith is now ever stronger than at any other time. We were not surprised because from the video released by Boko

Haram, it was obvious my husband was ready to go and be with the Lord.

“He knew where he was going and he was prepared for it. We are encouraged by the example showed. I know my husband to be a great man of faith;

I was sure after seeing the video that even if he died in the hands of his captors, it would not be a loss because he knew where he was going.”

It is a known fact, that the greatest growth of the church
Is found in the midst of persecution.

The EYN church is stronger now than ever before.

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Early on, Jesus prepared his disciples that following him
Would not be easy.

Matthew 5:11-12 NIV

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus considered it part and parcel of the Christian life
To face hardships and persecution for his sake.

But Christ did not leave us defenseless.

The gift of the Holy Spirit

Provides us with the strength and courage

And peace that surpasses our understanding

So that no matter what we face because of our faith
We can do so with grace and dignity.

Soren Kierkegaard once said

The tyrant dies and his rule is over, the martyr dies and his rule begins.

The difference being
Martyrdom is a sacrifice of love.

And nothing expresses loves so well
As to be willing to die for it.

Jesus knew this.
And so do his followers.

Praise be to God.