

- 1) I trust you found that graphic tale every bit as edifying as I did—which is . . . *not so much*.
 Stories of intrigue, lust, and violence: these are available—indeed, unavoidable—everywhere.
 If there's any place to run and hide from all of that, you'd think it would be the church!
 But there it is—and here we are. So . . . what *is* “the moral of this story”?
 The best I can come up with is: *Don't try this at home*.
 We could change the subject—talk about something else;
 but *there* the story *still* would *sit* in the living room—an elephant *most* awkward.

- 2) But *how*, exactly *do* we take this story on?
 A few weeks back, you may remember,
 we were looking on as David slew Goliath and Jesus stilled a storm.
 We noted then our tendency (when listening to stories) to seek *both* happy endings *and* clear morals.
 If push comes to shove, I suspect that most of us *don't insist* on happy endings.
 We know from long experience that life gets messy, hard, and cruel;
 that often things *don't* seem to turn out for the best.
 So “Happily Ever After” is, perhaps, unrealistic—I can let that go, can't you?
 But it is very hard, isn't it, to keep from scanning the stories we hear,
 searching for some clear meaning in the middle of the mess—
 some learning piece, some redemptive value—in a word, some “moral”?

- 3) Well, storyteller Mark doesn't gratify either itch—happy ending *or* clear moral.
 He simply recounts, blow by blow, a realistic story of what comes down
 when idealistic efforts run smack into business as usual.
 And—as we know—*that* often isn't pretty.
 - Jesus has been on a roll, doing deeds of power, healing all kinds of human hurt.
 He rolls on into his own home town and gets stopped in his tracks by a giant bolder.
 He “could do no deeds of power there” says Mark—Jesus is thwarted by local unbelief.
 - But then he dispatches his disciples to undertake missions of mercy on their own.
 Maybe he hopes that *they'll* be able to get things back up to speed,
 even if *he's* been sidetracked . . . and—you know what? *They do—they do!*
 They cast out *many* demons—Mark tells us—and cure *many* who were sick.
 - Things have started going great again; and then, all of a sudden, out of the blue—Herod!
 (No happy ending today, folks—sorry about that!) But wait a minute!
 Isn't there at least a *moral* here? Something like: “*Power corrupts,*” perhaps?
 Well, we didn't need Mark to tell us *that*, now did we!?
 With regard to an *edifying* moral, Mark is simply *mum*.

- 4) This is not to say that the grizzly account of Herod's horrifying banquet
 presents no moral dimensions, or has no moral implications.
 There is plenty in this story to fire both moral imagination and moral response:
 - There is an embarrassment of riches for a fortunate few,
 produced by depriving the marginalized many of their basic survival rations
 - There are serious physical, psychological, social, and spiritual consequences
 for the *supposedly* “fortunate few” who pig out on food and drink themselves silly.
 - There is crass sexual exploitation of a vulnerable young women by dirty old men—
 a mere *child*—who then is used as a mere *pawn* in protecting political and personal egos
 - There are all sorts of abuses of executive power and personal privilege
 - There is a grudge-fed vendetta pulled off by backchannel emotional blackmail
 - There is a prophetic whistleblower squelched for speaking hard but necessary truth

- And, perhaps, most important: apart from John the Baptist (a victim of unjust execution) there is the tragic fact that every single player here is caught up in a feeding frenzy that consumes every last one of them in their conspicuous, addictive consumption. Everyone is devouring—and everyone ends up devoured.

If there *is* a moral here, it's gotta be something like: *No such thing as a free lunch.*

- 5) As I have watched the media circuses that have this week have surrounded the *actions* of two governors and the *death* of a tragically talented cultural idol, I've found myself saying not so much: *Shame! Shame!* as *Oh My God!*
Not *Who do we get to blame?* but
How in the world do we set about transforming so many addictive orgies into healthier forms of nourishment?

But there are no simple morals we can deftly program to produce such happy endings—morally desirable—even morally *necessary* though such happy endings might be in the midst of all our broken stories.

- 6) To thicken a thick plot further still,

"Feeding those who hunger in God's name!" is no sure and certain fix.

We heard *another* banquet story today—one that sounded far more innocent.

- David feeding his people in ceremonial celebration as he brings the Ark to Jerusalem.
- This is David's an honest attempt to unite his people, to consolidate his reign—under *God's* authority—but in *his* capital.
- David spares no expense—bread, meat, raisins—no small spread for 30,000 men, and heaven knows how many women. (Aren't you glad we didn't have to cater this meal?)
- But this banquet, too, turns out to be a lunch not as free as it looks. This is—for the king and his people—the initial step in a transition—slow, but sure, from David trying to *lead* his people in serving *God's* purposes, into David trying to *employ* God in the service of his *own* purposes.
- When and where, exactly, does David lose it? Who can say?
But this we *can* say: In 2 weeks we will have to watch as David has one of his brave and loyal officers killed so he can take sole possession of the poor man's beautiful wife.
- Sound like Herod to you? Does to me! Perhaps there *is* a moral here:
Intoning the name of God as you feed the hungry is no sure protection against self-deception

So, are we left as helpless bystanders to our culture's feeding frenzies—

hoping against hope that we won't get sucked in but realistic enough to recognize that our chances of escaping the vortex are between slim and none?

- 7) Well, there *is* one *more* banquet—not a “happily ever after” one, but a hopeful meal nonetheless—a truly free lunch in the most important sense of the term.

While Mark utters not a word of moralizing about Herod's banquet;

immediately after depicting in gory detail the multidimensional carnage of Herod's avaricious meal,

Mark, quietly, simply, without any commentary, tells another banquet story—a story in which—somehow,

not in a palace, but in a deserted wilderness,

not with fancy food elaborately prepared—but with minimal resources thrown together on the spot

not for the privileged and already overindulged, but for the ordinary who live hand to mouth

not with “*you owe me,*” but with “*what you see is what you get—so take what you need*”

not with exploitation but with utter generosity

somehow, in the presence of Jesus, 5000 men are fed—and heaven knows how many women.

- 8) A picnic lunch this is—not a power lunch. But wait . . . let's not move too quickly here. *This is* a meal with historical, social, moral, and political dimensions and implications.
- It is not a “happily ever after” meal, but it's not a “stand alone” meal either.
 - Mark's readers know, that over and over, again and again,
 - in the face of one addictive orgy after another, God serves up an alternative menu
 - A Passover meal—necessary nourishment for a journey toward freedom.
 - A table prepared in the wilderness—
 - even though the people whine and cry that they'd rather go back into slavery
 - Meal after meal with tax collectors and sinners—*our* kind of people.
 - An anguish filled final meal with 12 folks Jesus has called into the freedom journey—
 - a meal in which it becomes palpably clear,
 - that, all along, God *has* been feeding us with God's very life—
 - and that, in the long, long journey toward freedom,
 - God will *keep on* feeding us, come what may, no matter what.
- 9) The unknown author of the Epistle to the Ephesians puts it this way:
*In Jesus, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses,
according to the riches of his grace which he lavishes upon us.*
- Truth be told, when I think about it—way down deep—
a gift like that is far, far better than a happy ending or even a clear moral.
And—what is more—a gift like that stirs my moral imagination
with all sorts of possibilities as to how you and I can serve God's alternative menu
in ways that do not feed our addictions, but celebrate God's abundance.