

“Herod the Terrible”

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The worst sermon takeaway is to ponder the sins of those who didn't hear it.

Mark 6:14-29

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Terrible or tearable?

Today's sermon title was chosen weeks ago, long before this week's political drama in Washington played out. Nancy Pelosi dramatically shredded her print copy of President Trump's State of the Union address, calling it "tearable." The volley of words and actions between those two leaders and many others reached a fever pitch this week.

I could have changed my sermon title, but it actually seemed even more fitting than it did when I chose it. Perhaps not only the title was providential, but the text. Other than his trial and crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, there are only a handful of stories in the Gospels that connect Jesus to the politics of his day.

Some of you may find my "speech" also "tearable." I ask for humility and openness to the Holy Spirit. I pray he will blow away like chaff whatever is not of him, convict of sin, and strengthen our passion for what is true and right.

Herod and John

With most public clashes, two primary names stand out. In Washington this week it was Pelosi and Trump. In Mark 6 it's John and Herod. They're hardly the only individuals enfolded into the drama, but two names symbolize the clash of values. What's surprising to me is that neither of these leading characters is Jesus.

We've met John before in this gospel, but only fleetingly in the introduction (1:2-9). Mark quotes from two prophetic texts with the common word "prepare" to describe John's role. He came to get people ready for God to break into salvation history in an unprecedented way through Jesus Christ. Far from being a polished speaker or educated clergyman, John dressed and ate like a wild man from the desert.

There was an undeniable magnetism about John. People flocked to him, even though he performed no miracles and his message was primarily negative: "Repent!" He even insisted on a public admission of their sinfulness through water baptism. Throngs sought him out. When he preached about their sins, they couldn't stay away, couldn't stop listening, hungry for truth and for God to break through.

Don't you find it odd, though, that John mostly disappears from the Gospel records after he baptizes Jesus? His celebrity status plummets. He still has disciples during Jesus' time (Matthew 11:2; Mark 2:18; 6:29; Luke 7:19; 11:1), and his movement even outlasts Jesus' earthly life (Acts 18:25; 19:1-7). But the Gospel spotlight totally shifts to Jesus. John's OK with that. "He must increase; I must decrease" (John 3:30).

The other principal character in this narrative, Herod, is more complex. The problem is that to speak of "Herod" during the time of Jesus is like speaking of "Bush" or "Kennedy" during my lifetime. "Herod" was a family, not a person.

The Herod we meet in our text was not the founder of the dynasty, nor the most terrible. That distinction belongs to his father, aka "Herod the Great." The reason Herod became so great is that his personal charisma early in life was matched by an uncanny administrative instinct and political savvy. For more than three decades he navigated the tumultuous terrain of politics on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, somehow finding a way to keep both Roman emperors and Jewish residents content enough to maintain his hold on power.

But, as Lord Acton famously said, "Power corrupts," and the more power Herod gained the more corrupt he became. He married ten different women, produced heirs by several of them, and then realized that he had produced only more duplicates of himself – power-hungry, ruthless, ambitious men. He put to death multiple wives and sons whom he thought to be threats, leading Caesar to quip that it was safer to be Herod's pig (Greek: *hus*) than his son (Greek: *huios*).

We could spend hours on Herod the Great. He built numerous palaces and fortresses and introduced Graeco-Roman entertainment all around and even into Judea and Galilee with amphitheaters and hippodromes. He somehow appeased the Jews in the process, especially with his greatest architectural accomplishment, the rebuilding and expansion of the temple in Jerusalem. He's the Herod who, toward the end of his reign, met the wise men in Jerusalem who were searching for "the king of the Jews," then infamously tried to kill Jesus by killing all the baby boys in and around Bethlehem.

But he's not the Herod in our story. This "Herod" is his son, called Herod Antipas (short for *antipatras*, "his father's replacement", or "Herod Junior"). He was one of three survivors granted political power after Herod the Great died. In a compromise among the sons, Rome divided Herod's kingdom into four parts, called tetrarchies, and Herod Antipas ruled a geographically split tetrarchy made up of Galilee and Perea. That's important because both John the Baptist and Jesus conducted most of their ministry in Galilee and Perea. Herod Antipas was the politician in charge for almost all of Jesus' earthly life.



Galilee was Antipas' breadbasket, a fertile area compared to Perea, mostly desert. Antipas built several significant cities during Jesus' lifetime, including Sepphoris, just a few miles from Nazareth, which means that both Joseph and Jesus probably honed and used their carpentry and masonry skills there. Antipas also built Tiberias, his capital, named in honor of the Roman emperor, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps one reason Antipas was also given Perea is because it included one of Herod's finest fortress-palaces, Machaerus. The New Testament doesn't mention this fact, but Josephus says Machaerus is where our story takes place.

The fateful dance

As our text opens, Jesus has just sent out his twelve disciples two by two. This multiplication of his presence by proxy raises the alarm for Herod Antipas, who possesses all of his father's insecurities. Josephus says that the reason Herod executed John was because his popularity might provoke a revolt. When Herod hears that Jesus' ministry is expanding and his fame is rising, Mark tells us he exclaimed, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!" (16)

This is one of three possibilities being raised about Jesus' identity (14-15), none of which is correct. For Mark's readers, John's beheading needs a back story, because we hadn't heard about it yet. Let me do my best to tell it to you chronologically.

Sometime during his 20s, Caesar Augustus had arranged for Antipas to marry an Arabian princess, presumably to keep peace between the Arabs and Jews. At times arranged marriages work out beautifully; this one did not. A year or two before our story, Antipas set out on a journey to Rome and visited his brother Herod Philip on the coast. There he fell madly in love with Philip's wife, a woman named Herodias, also trapped in a loveless marriage. And yes, her name means she was also part of the family; she was Herod Antipas' niece. Philip and Herodias had at least one child, a voluptuous teenager. She's not named in the Gospels but Josephus calls her Salome.

None of that mattered. The infatuation between Antipas and Herodias was mutual and instant. Herodias agreed to divorce Philip and marry Antipas if he would divorce his Arabian bride. That didn't work out so well for Antipas, but that's another story. You can only imagine the scandal, though, as Herod sends one wife packing and brings his new wife and stepdaughter into the palace, publicly defying Jewish morality which only allowed such a marriage if the brother had died without fathering a child.

Who's going to be bold enough – or stupid enough – to confront an insecure tyrant about his adultery and immoral marriage? People die when they cross the Herods. One man is bold enough to do so, and believes it is his duty to do so. John the Baptist. And here's what you may not see by a cursory reading of the text in your Bible. John was confronting Herod *repeatedly* with his immorality (18).

You might ask, "Why did Herod give him that chance?" Herod actually liked John (20). He thought he was a good man. He respected him. He enjoyed John's sermons. At the same time John perplexed him. He wasn't sure what to make of him.

Herodias, however, seethed (19). She had a man who found her irresistible, and she loved him. She wanted her illicit relationship to be affirmed, publicly and privately. It probably was, except for John. So she began to demand that John be silenced. She really wanted him dead (19), but it wasn't in her power. To appease his wife and to protect John, Antipas put John in prison in his fortress at Machaerus. Problem solved.

Until the birthday party (21), which must have been quite a party. Remember, Antipas' kingdom was split geographically. It took some advance planning to bring all the leading officers and generals from Sepphoris and Tiberias and throughout Galilee (21) all the way down to Machaerus for the banquet. I'm sure the booze flowed.

Herod says, "Hey, guys, you want to have some fun? My wife's teenage daughter is quite the dancer. Let's bring her in" (22). One wonders why a mother would allow this, but perhaps in her mind this was a chance for Salome to marry a powerful man, which she later did, twice. Maybe Herodias' plot was even more sinister as she suggested the dance in front of some out of control men. She knows her husband's weakness is lust. It's how she lured him in the first place. If she can tap into his passion, she can get what she wants.

The place erupts in cheers and applause for the sensual floor show (22), and Herod says to Salome in front of everyone, "Great work! You deserve a prize for that. Name it, up to half my kingdom" (22). That's poetic, of course. Had she said, "I'll take Galilee," it's not like she would have had it. Neither does he mean, "Do you want a piece of birthday cake?" She can name something worthy of her entertainment skills.

"Give me a minute to think about that," she says, and slips out of the room where her mother, Herodias, is waiting. "Mom, they, like, loved me! And your husband says I can have, like, whatever I want as a reward! What, like, should I ask for?" (24)

Herodias seizes her chance (21). “Ask for the head of John the Baptist” (24).

As Salome returns to the birthday bash, the men roar their approval again. “Encore!” She silences them and addresses Herod. “Anything I want, right?”

“By God and heaven, girl, I swear it (23),” Herod says. “The sky’s the limit.”

“I want, right now, on a platter, the head of John the Baptist” (25).

The word Mark uses to describe Herod’s response (26) is the same word he later uses to describe Jesus’ emotional state in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he died (14:34). Herod Antipas is “exceedingly sorrowful,” “deeply grieved.” But what choice does he have? In his rash, drunken lust he had made a very public vow.

This part of the story ends with an event that must have permanently altered this girl’s psyche. She receives from the executioner a banquet platter bearing the severed head of a man of whom Jesus would later say, “Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11). She hands the platter to her smirking mother (28), and John’s disciples come to bury his body (29).

Lessons from Herod the Terrible

So what are the lessons from Herod the Terrible for us?

First, politicians will always be political. I’m using the word “political” in the sense of acting in the interest of a political party or group. It’s been fascinating this week to watch both Democrats and Republicans accuse one another of acting out of political motives. My response is, “Of course.” What else would they do?

Although Antipas’ moral compass was badly damaged by his father, I pity him as he tried to balance loyalty to Rome, control of the territory, and survival – literal survival. In the process of doing that, he was political. Why should we be surprised?

There’s a fine line, maybe even a blurry one, between self-interest and national interest. I really do believe that every person on Capitol Hill this week believed they were acting in the best interests of the country. I’m not saying they believed that about each other; they believed it about themselves. The rest of us tend to give the benefit of the doubt to our political allies and mistrust the motives of our enemies.

It’s why we are called to pray for our leaders. Whoever they are, whatever their political persuasion, we need to pray for our politicians. Like Antipas, they face the pull of multiple constituencies, maybe even more so in our democracy.

Second, political power is fleeting. I find it interesting that Jesus had so little interest in Herod Antipas even though he lived and worked under Herod’s rule his entire life. It was almost as if he treated the greatest political power of his generation as a

nonentity. Luke records one time when the Pharisees warned Jesus that Herod was trying to kill him. Jesus answered by calling Herod “that fox” and by saying, in so many words, that the timing of his death was up to God and no human ruler (Luke 13:31-33).

I remember attending a General Synod of the United Church of Christ shortly after Barack Obama was elected President. The UCC President crowed, “Never before in the history of America has the values of America lined up so well with the values of the United Church of Christ.” And Obama won a second term. Then came Donald Trump and the Obama-era political power crumbled. Mr. Trump may also win a second term.

Whether or not he does, I can tell you on the authority of the Word of God as well as with my knowledge of American and world history: the world has never produced a permanent political system, party, leader, or even country. Revelation 11:15 says, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.” Until that day, if you tie your hopes to any human leader or party, you are chaining yourself to a sinking ship.

Finally, all politicians are terrible. Before someone walks out, I had better hasten to add, “All pastors are terrible. Every person in this sanctuary is terrible. And everyone who ever lived is terrible.” Except Jesus, of course! Are there different levels of terrible? Absolutely. But we are all terrible apart from grace. The worst sermon takeaway is to ponder the sins of those who aren’t here. Let’s reflect on our own.

This week I read the final chapter of the book I mentioned last week, *Confronting Christianity*. Rebecca McLaughlin is wrestling with the question, “How Could a Loving God Send People to Hell?” I’m not sure she answers that specific question very well, but she does discuss the “terribleness” of all of us, what we deserve.

As she discusses the #MeToo sexual harassment movement, she quotes a Christian blogger named Andy Crouch: “If you knew the full condition of my heart, my fantasies and grievances, my anxieties and my darkest solitary thoughts, you would declare me a danger to myself and others. I cannot be entrusted with power by myself, certainly not with celebrity, and neither can you.”

Many people, myself included, believe that the reason our founding fathers refused to entrust any one individual or branch of government with absolute power is because they knew we are all, deep down, “terrible.” So it’s OK with me if you believe Nancy Pelosi is terrible, or Donald Trump is terrible, or both of them are terrible, because they are. And so are you.

While we are all called to do what we can to make this world more just and righteous, and that means we absolutely should enter into the political fray; the hope of the world will never be a donkey or an elephant. The hope of the world is in the cross of Christ alone. How many people know which party you belong to? And how many know who your Lord is? Our ultimate loyalty is to his kingdom. Amen.