

"Murdering John" - Mark 6:14-29

I mentioned last week that unbelief is a hideously powerful force. It is not based on intellect or logic. It is based on the sinful desire men and women have to pretend they are in complete control of their own lives, that they are captains of their own ships. We instinctively want to call our own shots. And we resist any outside authority telling us what to do.

“You’re not the boss of me!”

In our fallen, depraved state, we resist any claim even our Creator has on our lives. Even though He has promised us an eternity of blessing and an eternity of freedom if we will only submit to His Lordship. Jesus says,

Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed. (John 8:36)

Free from the slavery of sin.

Ironically, our foolish, sinful quest for freedom results in the worst kind of slavery. As Paul says to the Romans:

Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? (Romans 6:16)

Freedom, as we so often try to define it, is impossible to achieve because you are going to serve somebody. You are either going to serve Satan, or you are going to serve the Lord and if you think you can simply serve yourself, you are desperately deceived.

This morning, we are going to look at a man who was desperately deceived, a man who was self-indulgent, a man who was a slave to his passions, a man who will spend eternity in Hell. This man clearly demonstrates the insanity of sin and the insanity of refusing to repent and turn to Christ. But before you shake your head at him, understand that you have the exact same sinful tendencies and without availing yourself to the grace of Almighty God, you would suffer exactly the same fate.

Let’s go to our text now.

Now King Herod heard of Him, for His name had become well known. And he said, "John the Baptist is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him." (Mark 6:14)

Herod the Great was a Roman client king of Judea at the time of Jesus’ birth. He was the guy the wise men visited. That’s a different Herod. Herod the Great served at the pleasure of the Roman emperor, so he wasn’t completely sovereign, but he was powerful. And he engaged in a number of impressive building projects, including the extensive expansion and beautification of the second Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. He wasn’t technically a Jew, at least not by blood. His father was an Edomite who had converted to Judaism, so Herod was raised in the Jewish religion. But many of the Jewish leaders viewed him with utter contempt.

He wasn’t a good guy. He was the king we read about in Matthew, who ordered the slaughter of all male children under the age of 2 in Bethlehem. (Matthew 2:16) He was out to get Jesus, because he saw Jesus as a threat to his dynasty.

Well, that Herod the Great died in either 4 BC or 2 BC. Most scholars believe it was 4 BC, but there is some reason to believe it might have been a couple years later. So, he’s not the Herod Mark is referring to here in chapter 6. This is one of his sons.

When Old Herod died, his kingdom was divided between 3 of his sons and one of his daughters. One of the sons was named Herod Antipas and he's the guy we're looking at today. Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea. His brother, Philip, became tetrarch of territories north and east of the Jordan. There's another Herod in Scripture – Herod Agrippa. He's a grandson of Herod the Great. So, I know it can get a bit confusing.

So, Herod Antipas heard of Jesus, and assumed that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead. Jesus had become quite famous during his time in Galilee and there was a lot of speculation about who he really was. At one point, Jesus actually asked his disciples about it, and their response was:

"Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." (Matthew 16:14)

Of course, that speculation was wrong, but the speculation was rampant. Verse 15 refers to the speculation.

Others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is the Prophet, or like one of the prophets." But when Herod heard, he said, "This is John, whom I beheaded; he has been raised from the dead!" (Mark 6:15-16)

This is a statement of superstitious terror. Herod was afraid. He knew he had executed an innocent man and when he heard of Jesus' miraculous works, his imagination and what conscience he had left began to work on his mind. Why was he so afraid? Mark needed to explain, so he turns back the clock a bit.

This thing reads like a bad soap opera.

For Herod himself had sent and laid hold of John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; for he had married her. Because John had said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." (Mark 6:17-18)

I don't want to get into all the sordid details here this morning, at the bottom line is, Herod got the hots for his brother's wife. I don't know who seduced whom, but both Herod and Herodias were guilty of adultery. It's actually even worse than that. It turns out that she's a granddaughter of Herod the Great. So, she's been hooking up with her uncles. Her brother is Herod Antipas, by the way, is the guy who got eaten by worms in Acts 12:23.

I told you it was a bad soap opera!

John the Baptist, being a preacher of righteousness, called out Herod for his sin. Herod didn't like it, but Herodias really didn't like it. She wanted John dead. Nice gal!

Therefore Herodias held it against him and wanted to kill him, but she could not; for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly. (Mark 6:19-20)

Now, you don't have to read too deeply between the lines to realize that Herod was really quite conflicted. He wanted to keep peace with his wife. Herodias couldn't have been that easy to live with. She was the embodiment of the sort of woman Proverbs warns about:

Reproofs of instruction are the way of life, To keep you from the evil woman, From the flattering tongue of a seductress. Do not lust after her

beauty in your heart, Nor let her allure you with her eyelids. For by means of a harlot A man is reduced to a crust of bread; And an adulteress will prey upon his precious life. Can a man take fire to his bosom, And his clothes not be burned? Can one walk on hot coals, And his feet not be seared? So is he who goes in to his neighbor's wife; Whoever touches her shall not be innocent. (Proverbs 6:23-29)

Herod should have listened to the wisdom of Proverbs. He wanted to keep peace with Herodias, but he was also in awe of John the prophet. He knew John was a righteous man. He knew John was a preacher of righteousness. And Herod obviously went to listen to John. He heard him gladly, says the Scripture. He enjoyed listening to John.

So, he was conflicted. Happy wife; happy life. Or listen to John. He was greatly perplexed. He had a sense of guilt because he knew it was wrong to put his own wife away and steal his brother's. As a result, he tried to find a compromise. He arrested John and threw him into the palace dungeon. But he protected his life. And John was probably in that dungeon for about a year, probably pretty discouraged, because he sent a couple disciples to Jesus asking if He was really the Christ. And Jesus said "oh yes", and testified that John was the greatest of the Old Testament prophets.

John is in prison and Herodias is frustrated. Then suddenly, her chance comes as a result of Herod's flawed character.

Then an opportune day came when Herod on his birthday gave a feast for his nobles, the high officers, and the chief men of Galilee. (Mark 6:21)

Isn't that nice? Herod throws himself a birthday party. This isn't just cake and ice cream, folks. This is a drunken orgy of debauchery. It's a guys-only affair. And all the Galilean movers and shakers were there to curry favor with the tetrarch.

And when Herodias' daughter herself came in and danced, and pleased Herod and those who sat with him, the king said to the girl, "Ask me whatever you want, and I will give it to you." He also swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half my kingdom." (Mark 6:22-23)

Now, this really creeps me out. We're talking about his own step-daughter, here, who was also his niece. She was probably a teen-ager and make no mistake; this was no chaste tap dance. This was a dance designed to appeal to the basest male instincts and it worked. She pleased all the guys and she pleased Herod enough that he essentially gave her a blank check – "anything you want".

So she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist!" Immediately she came in with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." (Mark 6:24-25)

What kind of depravity would allow a mother to let her teen-aged daughter engage in such behavior? This was more than a crime of opportunity. This was a murder conspiracy. Herodias wanted John dead simply because he had the courage to call her out for her sin. And she was willing to stop at nothing to ensure his murder.

And the king was exceedingly sorry; yet, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he did not want to refuse her. (Mark 6:26)

Herod knew this was wrong, but he valued his foolish pride far more than he valued justice. He made this oath in front of witnesses. Rather than stand up for what he knew was right, Herod made the cowardly call.

Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded his head to be brought. And he went and beheaded him in prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. (Mark 6:27-28)

In John's Gospel, we read this about Jesus:

He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. (John 1:11)

The Nation Israel was chosen by God to be the conduit for salvation. Paul writes:

What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God. (Romans 3:1-2)

The very Word of God came to the world through the Jews. But by in large, they did not receive Him. In rejecting Jesus, they also rejected His prophet. John, whom Jesus called the greatest of the prophets. John, who testified of Jesus.

..., saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose." (John 1:26-27)

And then, seeing Jesus approaching, John said:

"Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29)

John's rejection is a precursor to Jesus' rejection. Shortly after the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, Jesus pronounced a curse on the entire Jewish religious establishment.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'BLESSED is HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!' " (Matthew 23:37-39)

John was the greatest of the prophets who were killed by the Jewish establishment. John was murdered for the crime of delivering God's truth. And it would shake the faith of those who followed John and subsequently followed Jesus. It was incredibly discouraging.

When his disciples heard of it, they came and took away his corpse and laid it in a tomb. (Mark 6:29)

But what of Herod? What of Herodias? What of her daughter? What of the Herodians who were present at that drunken party. They were all guilty of John's murder. There is no evidence that they ever repented. In fact, after Jesus' arrest, Pilate sent Him to Herod, who was anxious to see Him.

Now when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceedingly glad; for he had desired for a long time to see Him, because he had heard many things about Him, and he hoped to see some miracle done by Him. Then he questioned Him with many words, but He answered him nothing. (Luke 23:8-9)

Jesus had nothing to say to Herod. He knew Herod would never come to saving faith. What a pathetic human being! What a tragic, superficial man! Intimidated by this woman,

afraid of losing face before his so-called friends, full of foolish pride, he chose the broad way to hell rather than the narrow gate that leads to salvation.

What about you?

“Me,” you ask? “Oh, I would never have murdered John. I certainly wouldn’t have crucified Jesus.”

Really?

If you reject Jesus, you are just as guilty as His executioners. If you refuse to repent and submit to His Lordship, it is as if you are pounding those nails into His flesh. If you are too proud to admit you are a sinner and receive His forgiveness, you are as tragic and pathetic as Herod Antipas. If you refuse to repent, you will be Herod’s companion in Hell, burning in eternal torment.

Don’t put the King of Glory to open shame. Admit your sins. Believe that Jesus died to pay the penalty you deserve. Acknowledge Him as Lord and Savior and receive His forgiveness.

It’s too late for Herod. It’s not too late for you.

... if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)