



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

“King Herod and The National Enquirer”

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The Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 6:14-29

Even before Jesus, John the Baptist is the original superstar in the gospels. Out there in the wilderness, next to the Jordan River, he’s drawing huge crowds to hear his preaching -- and to take a dip in the water of new life. Throngs of people come out from the city to hear him – the curious, the lonely, the lost, people ready to be baptized and start again, and the skeptical religious rulers who watch from a distance.

Israel hasn’t seen anyone like him in a long time – John is on fire for God. Everything he does points to God: His odd clothes and odder food. His complete inability to go along to get along. The fire in his eyes, and the vision in his speech. No surprise – he makes people nervous, and eventually he ends up in Herod’s dungeon.

When we see John again, in this flashback story in Mark’s gospel, the crowds are gone, the paparazzi packed up, and everyone is back in the city. John is in Herod’s dungeon, and all of the attention is now on Herod.

By any standard we can understand, the day belongs to Herod. Beautiful wife, lovely stepdaughter, marvelous feast in a gorgeous palace. Even that troublemaker John the Baptist under lock and key, where he can’t stir things up any more.

And yet, a little digging – say by *The National Enquirer* or the *Access Hollywood* of the first century – reveals that Herod is worthy of tabloid TV and Twitter, too. His life is just about as colorful as John’s. This is Herod Junior, the son of the murderous Herod who killed the babies at Jesus’ birth. The rages of the father also included the deaths of inconvenient family members and various threats to the throne. If that’s your dad, that’s gotta be bad for your self-esteem.

Eventually, Herod Junior – our Herod – inherited a third of his father’s kingdom. Herod’s wife, who used to be his sister-in-law, is also his niece, the daughter of his half brother. Granted he had a lot of half brothers because his father had a lot of wives, but still. The dancing stepdaughter is also his niece, now on view for all of his guests. You have to wonder, too, why his step-daughter is dancing for the party, a job usually reserved for servants and prostitutes.

The interesting thing about Herod is not that he’s so horrible, but that he’s almost there. He stands for us as someone who’s a step away from truth. He respects and listens to John the Baptist – he hears some glimmer of the truth, feels something of God’s presence in John’s presence. But when the moment of decision comes, he falters. He can’t follow. He gives in to what people will think, to the pressures of position and appearance.

I wonder if we are more like Herod than we care to imagine.

We all have those moments, when we are less John the Baptist, clear about our faith, on fire for God -- and more Herod, almost there. Wavering. Captive to the pressures around us. Worse, our moments are way less clear than an invitation to kill off our tormentors. We do pretty well not beheading our enemies, I suspect. It's the other moments that test us. The moment when we realize that something in our lives has a hold over us -- be it alcohol, or needing to feel superior, or anger, or shopping. We can face the struggle and embarrassment of doing something about it...or go on as we are. The moment when our child comes and tells us something we never wanted to hear...and we have one instant to choose between support and distance. The moment when life changes for us, and a dream dies, and our only choice is not what happens, but how we react.

Herod only gets the one moment to decide whether to follow or not. Often, for us, by God's grace, there's another chance. We can keep quitting drinking or smoking, yelling or being abusive, until we get it right. Our children are remarkably forgiving. We can come to understand our parents, living or dead, in new ways, and grow into peace. The people we hurt circle back through our lives, and we can make amends. The second half of life offers balance for the excesses of the first. We can come back to those moments of truth with more faith, more peace, more grace for others and forgiveness for ourselves. Learning to get in right in the small things will prepare us for the big things, when they come.

All of us know more Herods than John the Baptists. John is a tough role model for everyday life. His brand of fire and passion doesn't wear well at the office or the kitchen table, with our friends or when we serve on church committees. But in those moments when we have to choose one road or another, his love for God, his devotion to truth, his fiery passion for all things God-related can serve us all well.

As Mark remembers this story, he places it next to Jesus sending his followers out to teach and preach on their own. We're meant to understand the story of John and Herod next to the story of the ordinary disciples, people like you and me, sent out by Jesus into the world. Mark is telling us something about following God -- that our following will lead us into some strange places, and will place us with some strange people. Even in that dungeon, John is still speaking the truth. Still can't go along to get along, even to save his own life. Still on fire for God.

From the very beginning, Jesus asks his followers not for success, but for faithfulness. He warns them that there are no guarantees -- in fact, he promises them places of failure. When this happens, he says, shake the dust of failure from your feet and try again. Not if things don't work out, but when.

Early in my working life, in my first adult job, I was lamenting some turn of events to a wise friend. "It's not about effort," he told me. "No one cares that you tried really hard -- it's about results." True it is -- at work, in classes, in our volunteer work. In most of the world, it really is about results.

But the kingdom of God is the one place where it's different. Here it actually is about effort. Trying again. Shaking the dust from our feet and starting again in another town for the disciples. Still speaking truth in the dungeon for John. Listening, and almost getting it, for Herod.

In the end, we are called to what can't be seen -- what can't be found on Twitter or seen online or reported in *The National Enquirer*. The focus of the world, and the culture, and the paparazzi, and anyone who's paying attention is on the Herods of the world. But, unseen, the followers of Jesus then and now keep at it. Unseen, we are still on the road. Unseen, still speaking truth and living with love. It's not about the crowds, the titles, the public acclaim...not about what people can see...not even about results, in the kingdom of God. Of course, we want to get things done for God, but in this one place, we are called to the effort, and not the results. Called to keep at it, in the face of seeming failure. Called to the road, and not the palace. Called to humility, and not to fame. Called to face those moments as they come and to answer with our faith, our love, our hope for the future. Amen.