

"7 And He *summoned the twelve and began to send them out in pairs, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits; 8 and He instructed them that they should take nothing for their journey, except a mere staff--no bread, no bag, no money in their belt-- 9 but to wear sandals; and He added, "Do not put on two tunics." 10 And He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave town. 11 "Any place that does not receive you or listen to you, as you go out from there, shake the dust off the soles of your feet for a testimony against them." 12 They went out and preached that men should repent. 13 And they were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them. 14 And King Herod heard of it, for His name had become well known; and people were saying, "John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him." 15 But others were saying, "He is Elijah." And others were saying, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16 But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen!" 17 For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. 18 For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19 Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so; 20 for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him. 21 A strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee; 22 and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you." 23 And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom." 24 And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." 25 Immediately she came in a hurry to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." 26 And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her. 27 Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison, 28 and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. 29 When his disciples heard about this, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb." Mark 6:7-29, NAS95.

The career of John the Baptist was given to us in a mere five verses at the beginning of Mark. We were told there of his sudden appearance in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance. He did no miracles, but people flocked to him anyway, eager to hear his message and to be baptized in the Jordan.

Then Jesus came to be baptized by John and from that time, our attention has been riveted to the carpenter-turned-rabbi as He travels through Galilee, performing works of healings, casting out demons, and preaching this same gospel of the kingdom which had been proclaimed by John.

Now, as we are brought back to further consider the story of John, it is by way of a flashback, for by this time in the narrative, John has been put to death.

And King Herod heard of it, for His name had become well known; and people were saying, "John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him."

But others were saying, "He is Elijah." And others were saying, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."

But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen!" (Mark 6:14-16).

This is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. Herod had a number of sons, some who actually survived the reign of their father. They all went by the name Herod. Herod Antipas is loosely called a king in this passage. He held a position of rulership akin to that of a governor - but it was via a political appointment from Rome.

The Herods had been the prominent political family in Israel for the past 70 years. Herod the Great had reigned over a united Israel from 37 B.C. to his death in 4 B.C. It was he who attempted the assassination of the infant Jesus recorded in Matthew 2. At his death, his kingdom was divided up among three of his surviving sons.

Archelaus had been given Judea, but had done such a poor job of ruling it that he had been removed from office and a governor put in his place. The current governor was Pontius Pilate.

Philip, the son of Herod by Cleopatra (not the one from Egypt), had been given the Tetrarchy of the lands of Trachonitus and Ituria to the northeast of Galilee; the area known today as the Golan Heights.

Antipas was given Galilee on the west and Perea on the east bank of the Jordan River. His title was that of a Tetrarch (literally, "ruler of a fourth part"). He built his palace at Sepphoris, only 4 miles to the northeast of Nazareth.

Thus, Herod Antipas was not actually a king. He ruled at the whim of Rome. Indeed, on one occasion he traveled to Rome and requested that Emperor Caligula make him a

king, but he was refused.

Although he was technically not a king, it was common for his subjects to refer to him as their king. After all, if it walked like a duck and it quacked like a duck, then it was only natural that they should call it a duck, even if Rome chose to call it a Tetrarch.

The situation which brings Herod into our story is the sending by Jesus of the Twelve in teams of two. He had commissioned them and He had instructed them and then He sent them out. They were to do what He had been doing.

They were to preach.

They were to cast out demons.

They were to heal the sick.

Since the death of John the Baptist, there had been only Jesus doing these things. And He had not confined His ministry to Galilee. He had recently returned from the Decapolis. Now He is back, doing these works. But His ministry has greatly multiplied. Instead of Jesus alone, there are now 12 men in the mold of Jesus. It is as though Jesus is suddenly everywhere.

Speculation runs rampant. A number of theories are voiced as to what could be at the bottom of this explosive ministry.

The question, "Who is Jesus?" is still the most important question that can be asked. And the range of popular answers are no less misleading today than they were in that day.

And at the heart of the question is the true identity of this Galilean rabbi. Who is Jesus?

- a. John the Baptist risen from the dead.
- b. Elijah, whose coming had been promised in Malachi 4:5.
- c. A prophet like one from the Old Testament era.

Herod favored the first view, not because of any particular evidence, but because of his

own guilty conscience. His guilty conscience made him overly superstitious. There is a proverb that says, “the wicked flee when no one is pursuing” (Proverbs 28:1). Such was the case with Herod. He feared that John the Baptist might be returning to haunt him.

A WRONGFUL IMPRISONMENT

For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her.

For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.”

Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so; 20 for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him. (Mark 6:17-20).

During a visit to Rome, Herod Antipas had stayed in the home of his half-brother, Herod Philip (not Philip the Tetrarch) and his wife and half-niece, Herodias. Herodias was married to her half-uncle, Philip. They had a daughter named Salome. However, Herodias was discontent to be the wife of a commoner and she was impressed by the dashing young Antipas. They entered into an adulterous affair and secretly plotted to divorce their own spouses so that they could marry one another.

This presented some problems because Antipas was married to the daughter of Aretas, king of Arabia. King Aretas was not going to take kindly to the divorce of his daughter and they reasoned that it would be best if she met with some kind of “accident.”

When the princess learned of the plot, she ran home to daddy. This would ultimately lead to a war in which Antipas would suffer a crushing defeat at the hands of his ex-father-in-law.

Josephus relates that many of the Jewish people attributed the defeat of Antipas to his murder of John the Baptist.

“Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod’s army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist; for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness toward one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism... Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God’s displeasure against him.” (Antiquities 16:5:2).

With his wife gone, Herod wasted no time in bringing Herodias to live with him in Galilee and marrying her. Everyone in Galilee knew what was happening and everyone gossiped about the situation, but no one said anything publicly. No one except John.

John spoke out against this adulterous affair. He spoke out publicly and in the hearing of Herod. His ministry was to call people to repentance. This involved pointing out sin, especially when it was evident among the leaders of the people.

There is a principle here. It is that leaders are called to a higher responsibility. It is true in the church. You have only to read the qualifications for the offices of elder and deacon to see that it calls for a high standard of living. It is also true in government.

It is an abomination for kings to commit wickedness, for a throne is established on righteousness. (Proverbs 16:12).

It is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink, lest they drink and forget what is decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted. (Proverbs 31:4b-5).

Are you in a position of authority? It might be within the church or in government or in your job or even in your family. You have a high calling and a high responsibility.

John spoke out against the sin of Herod. And in doing so, he brought down the full wrath of Herodias. She was an ambitious woman. She manifested all of the ambitions of the other Herods. She had left her own husband because she wanted the prestige of being a queen. She would be the driving force behind the aspirations of Herod Antipas. She would tolerate nothing in her way - including this meddling prophet. Like

Jezebel of old, she sought to have her Elijah killed. There was only one problem. The problem was Herod.

(1) Herod was afraid of John (6:20).

He knew that John was right in what he was saying. He found it difficult to put a man Josephus adds that Herod was also afraid of the public reaction were he to put John to death.

(2) Herod... used to enjoy listening to him (6:20).

There was something about the preaching of John that Herod longed to hear. Perhaps he felt the stirrings of the Spirit of God. He was touched by the words of John. And this left him in a quandary. Should he believe the words of John and leave his adulterous relationship? Or should he reject those words?

There is a principle here. Truth always moves you. As you hear truth, you will always be moved either toward that truth to grasp it and hold it and appropriate it, or you will be moved away from it as you are hardened to its influence.

A FOOLISH PROMISE

A strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee; 22 and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you."

And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom." (Mark 6:21-23).

Herod had a winter palace on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea located at the extreme southern point of his domain in Perea. It was known as Macherus.

It had been built in the days of the Hasmoneans and had then been enlarged by Herod the Great and surrounded with elegant defenses. The town stood on the shoulder of the hill over which stood a mighty fortress, surrounded by walls over 200 feet high. Within this fortress was a magnificent palace.

From the heights of this fortress, one could look across the Dead Sea 3800 feet below to see the mountains of Judea in the distance. Josephus tells us that it was here that John the Baptist was brought and imprisoned.

The daughter of Herodias is not mentioned by name in the Bible, but Josephus tells us that her name was Salome (Antiquities 18:5:4). We do not know the nature of this dance, but it was sufficient to draw from Herod this amazing promise of up to half his kingdom.

We only understand the foolishness of this promise when we realize that it was a promise which Herod could not possibly keep because his kingdom was not his to give. He had begun to think of himself as an oriental king when he was only an appointed puppet acting at the behest of Rome.

There is a lesson here. It teaches us the danger of acting upon impulse. I have a personal rule which I try to follow (I don't always succeed). It is that I try never to make important decisions on the spur of the moment or when I am tired or depressed.

A MURDEROUS REQUEST

And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist."

Immediately she came in a hurry 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).

Upon hearing the promise of Herod, Salome sought out her mother to ask her advice. It was evidently a stag party with no women present.

Herodias had for some time entertained a grudge against John the Baptist. Now is her chance for revenge. And so, she instructs her daughter in this murderous request.

Herodias is the real villain of this story. She manipulated her daughter into degrading herself and she manipulated her husband into an act of murder.

The Jewish rabbis had a saying that a good woman might marry a bad man, because she might be able to make him as good as herself; but a good man can never marry a

bad woman, for she will eventually drag him down to her own level. Herod was not a good man to start with - but his wife made him a lot worse.

There is a lesson here for wives. You are going to influence your husband. The question is whether you are going to influence him for good or for evil.

THE POWER OF PEER PRESSURE

And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her.

Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison, 28 and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. (Mark 6:26-28).

Herod had resisted his wife's past attempts to have John killed. He knew that John was right in what he said. And yet, something caused him to act in a way contrary to what he desired. It was PEER PRESSURE. Even kings and tetrarchs are not immune to its pull. We need to be aware of its dangers.

You might be thinking to yourself, "Not me! I would never let myself be persuaded to act through peer pressure." You need to be aware that peer pressure takes many forms. It can make you dress a certain way. It can make you talk a certain way. It can cause you to act and it can cause you not to act when you know that you should.

Peer pressure will take place anytime that you place the opinions of PEOPLE over the opinions of the LORD.

Herod had invited the lords and the military commanders and the leading men of Galilee to impress them. He wanted them to think highly of him. This is why he had been trying to act like a king. And now he was trapped into this evil deed.

Herod was to come to an ignominious end. He would suffer defeat at the hands of King Aretas of Arabia. Then at the urging of his ambitious wife, he and Herodias would travel to Rome to seek the kingship of all of Palestine. His request would be his undoing. As he stood before Emperor Caligula, he was accused of conspiring against

BURIAL OF A MARTYR

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

As we conclude this narrative, we are struck by the various ends of the key characters. From a strictly human point of view, it seems as though the forces of darkness have won. John the Baptist has been silenced. Unlike Elijah of old, he has been silenced by the modern-day Ahab and Jezebel.

And yet, there is a question. The question haunts Herod as he continues to sit upon his shaky throne. Who is Jesus? And what is His relationship to John? For Herod there will be no answer. The answer does not come to those who bend to peer pressure. It does not come to those whose main interest is the furtherance of their own petty kingdoms.

The story of John the Baptist does not end here. It will not be over until the day of resurrection. The one who was buried in the ground will rise again from the dead. To find a crown of life awaiting him. He will stand before the King of kings and will hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" And the prophet who lost his life shall find it.

What, then, do we take with us from this section of Mark's Gospel?

While at this point, rumors swirled around Jesus, Jesus knew full well who he was and the role that John played in the great redemptive drama. As we will see when we get to Mark 9:9-13, Jesus explains John's ministry in the following terms. "As they were coming down the mountain [of transfiguration], Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what `rising from the dead; meant.

And they asked him, `Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?' Jesus replied, `To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it

written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they

wished, just as it is written about him.” Thus the people of Israel were right to assume that the coming of Elijah preceded the dawn of the messianic age. But they were wrong to think that Jesus was Elijah.

John was Elijah. Jesus was the covenant Lord who will bring blessing and curse to his people.

As we read in our Old Testament lesson this morning (Malachi 4:1-6), Elijah must indeed come before the day of judgment.

The prophet writes, “`Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,’ says the LORD Almighty. `Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,’ says the LORD Almighty. `Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. `See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

Thus John comes as the last of the Old Testament prophets—the final harbinger of the messianic age. This is why his ministry centered in a declaration of a baptism of repentance and in warning that someone far greater than he was to come after him. His entire ministry focused upon exalting Christ. As

Jesus himself says of John in Matthew 11:11-15, “I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And

if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear.” With the death of John the Baptist, the old covenant has come to a close and the messianic age has dawned. People were therefore fascinated with John’s

Herod and his wife Herodias must repent led to his death, the fact of the matter was, John the Baptist was the greatest of men because he knew that he must decrease so that Jesus might increase. He is Elijah, heralding the coming of the Messiah. And yet, no one can see it. Some think Jesus is Elijah, or even John come back to life. But everyone knows something is up and that God is beginning some mighty work. In John's cruel death, we are also given a glimpse of Jesus' fate. Jesus ministry will eventually take him to Jerusalem, where he too will be rejected, imprisoned and put to death. But Jesus' head will not be put on a platter. He will conquer death and the grave as he lays down his life for his sheep. Since he is far greater than Elijah, his death will save us from our sins. For his death is the very death of death itself. Amen.