

Ash Wednesday Service  
"Third Station of the Cross: Jesus Stands Before King Herod"  
Luke 23:1-12  
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Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church  
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This evening, we continue our countdown to Calvary by observing our NEXT personality surrounding Christ's Passion- Herod Antipas, who is often mistaken for his father- Herod the Great. Herod the Great was a ruthless, conniving king who had his wife and three of his sons killed. Herod the Great was also the one responsible for slaying all the children of Bethlehem in an effort to destroy the infant Jesus. He died not long after Jesus was born.

Herod Antipas is the SON of Herod the Great and, as the saying goes, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Character-wise, he was not much better than his father. Herod Antipas was NOT a king in the same sense that his father--Herod the Great--was but rather, he was what's known as a "tetrarch." Originally, a tetrarch (from the Greek word "tetra" meaning "four") was one who ruled over the fourth part of an area, but later, it came to mean a "petty ruler." Thus a tetrarch was a lesser title than that of a king and his power and authority was ALSO more limited. When Herod the Great died, his kingdom was divided among his sons into four parts of which Herod Antipas was given the region around Galilee and Perea, an area he ruled for close to 43 years- from 4 B.C. to 39 A.D. Therefore, throughout Jesus' life, Herod Antipas was the ONLY king he had ever known.

Now why was Jesus sent to Herod? The Sanhedrin--the Jewish Supreme Court--had convicted him of blasphemy and sentenced him to death. But as the Jews did not have the authority to execute a man, he was sent to Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, who ALONE had that authority. They knew that Pilate would never execute a man on the single charge of blasphemy for there was no more idolatrous and blasphemous religion in the WORLD than the one practiced by the Romans. Therefore, rather than charging him with violating Jewish law, they would have to convince Pilate that he was a dangerous revolutionary intent on overthrowing the forces of Rome, the GREATEST crime one could commit against the empire. Thus they assert that he was anti-tax, anti-Caesar, anti-Rome, and GRAVEST OF ALL, that he was trying to set himself up as a king in opposition to the emperor- all LIES, every one of them.

However, they fail to make their case with Pilate who RUINS their plans by declaring Jesus innocent. Yet feeling strong pressure from the Jews to find him guilty, Pilate seeks to worm his way out of his dilemma. He learns that Herod Antipas, a man he had had a long-standing feud with, is in Jerusalem for the high holy days. Knowing that Jesus is a Galilean, he decides to transfer Jesus from the jurisdiction of the area he was arrested in, that is, from Jerusalem of Judea to the jurisdiction of Jesus' home--Nazareth--and his primary place of ministry- Galilee. Pilate reasons that since Jesus was from the north country, what BETTER person to try Jesus than the RULER of that north country- HEROD. Therefore, he tries a slick political maneuver by transferring him over to Herod and by doing so, Pilate feels he has dodged a bullet.

Now it's important for us to understand just what kind of man this Herod is. In a marriage of political convenience, Herod married the daughter of an Arab king in order to build

an alliance with them and consolidate his power in the region. But while staying with his half-brother, Herod Philip, Antipas fell passionately in love with Philip's wife, Herodias. She subsequently left her husband for Antipas who sent HIS first wife, the daughter of the Arab king, away. Well, Antipas went on to marry Herodias who was not only his sister-in-law, but also his niece. The Arab king never forgave the injury done to his daughter and some years later, inflicted an overwhelming defeat on Herod's armies.

At this time, John the Baptist was preaching and teaching in the territory of Herod Antipas. He saved his most scathing rhetoric however for the adulterous and incestuous marriage between Herod and Herodias. Outraged over this, Herodias had John locked up in the terrible prison called Machaerus, also referred to as "the Black Castle." With her pride wounded, she felt threatened by his denunciations and determined that the only way to still that voice ONCE AND FOR ALL was to have him killed. The only question would be HOW?

The gospel of Mark tells us that Herod "feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and protected him; and when he heard him talk, he did many things, and he liked to hear him." This tells us that he was not yet a COMPLETELY depraved man, that he had SOME awareness of right and wrong, that his conscience still had SOME light left in it. He was fascinated by the sheer authority and force of the man, an authority and power that HE HIMSELF lacked. In contrast, Herod was a WEAK man- dominated by sensuality and lust, by pride and selfishness and greed. As a Jew, his religion was more of the sentimental kind rather than one that involved TRUE MORAL change.

Reflecting on the kind of person Herod was, he reminded me a lot like many of the alcoholics I used to minister to down at the local rescue missions in California. You see, many of them had been brought up in the church and raised by a pious and prayerful mother or father. However, as they grew older, they moved away from their family and the religious influences of their youth. Over the years, they lost their wives and children; lost their homes, their jobs, and their self-respect as they became enslaved to one thing or another whether it was alcohol or sex or drugs. They came to the mission, not so much for the preaching and love they received there, as for the free meals that were handed out each day.

Yet, I DID notice that whenever we sang a familiar hymn or mentioned a favorite Bible character, tears would come to many of their eyes as it brought back to their minds thoughts of their childhood, thoughts of their early home life and of their church. You see, they really had no intention of making any kind of a renewed commitment to Christ. Rather, it was the sweet remembrance of things past when life was still good and promising to them. They were drawn to the SENTIMENT of religion and not the CENTER of it—the person of JESUS HIMSELF-- and I imagine it was this same kind of sentiment that attracted Herod to a person like John and to HIS religion- Judaism. Any relation to his religion was purely emotional and superficial.

Well we're all aware of how John's life ended. At a dinner party hosted by Herod, Salome--the daughter of Herodias by a previous marriage--gave an extremely sensuous performance. Drunk with wine and filled with lusty appreciation, he offered Salome any wish she so desired- up to half his kingdom. Herodias finally saw an opportunity to silence John and cunningly persuaded her daughter to demand that his head be delivered to her. Herod, not wanting to embarrass himself before his guests, weakly gave in and the Baptist was summarily executed. We're told that Herod grieved but you can be sure his grief was neither DEEP nor LASTING.

Well, now we come to this morning's account and here we FURTHER see the weakness and shallowness of this king. When Jesus is brought before him, he is at first fearful that it is John the Baptist back from the dead. But when he sees it is a lone rabbi bound in chains, he's not just relieved, he's even DELIGHTED. He had heard of Jesus and his great wonder-working abilities, and for the first time, Jesus and Herod will meet face-to-face. But it wasn't his TEACHINGS that Herod was interested in- it was his MIRACLES. The tetrarch was not interested in learning ANYTHING- he didn't want TRUTH. Rather, he wanted to be AMUSED; he wanted to be ENTERTAINED like so MANY of the crowds that followed Jesus at the reports of his miracles. To Herod, Jesus was nothing more than a magician, a sleight-of-hand artist, and so he demands that Jesus put on a private show for him.

But Jesus REFUSES- he simply looks upon him with a gaze of infinite pity, thinking how blind and faithless and tragic a character Herod is. Besides, here was the man responsible for taking the life of his cousin, John, one whom he called the greatest of the prophets. Refusing to dignify ANY conversation with this king, he chose to IGNORE him instead. Still Herod persists. Seeming uninterested in any of the charges the Jews brought against him, he continues to question Jesus as to where he was from and where he got his mysterious powers. He demands answers from him but Jesus continues to maintain his silence.

Because he refused to respond to Herod's constant requests, Luke tells us that the chief priests and the scribes JOINED IN and began to denounce him. Earlier, Jesus had warned his disciples: "Do not give dogs what is holy; do not throw your pearls before swine: they will only trample on them, and turn and tear you to pieces." Not wanting to dignify this trial or give his accusers the satisfaction they demanded, their voices grew louder and their anger turned to open hostility. Nothing he would say or do would change the outcome as it had ALREADY been determined that he would die. It was now only a matter of HOW SOON.

Well, seeing no miracles from this man, Herod finally gives up. Having been denied any kind of amusement, he figures he'll then create his OWN. Since Jesus had claimed to be a king, the very title he HIMSELF most coveted, he would then make a king out of HIM. Ordering a regal robe to be draped around his shoulders, he made Jesus look the part and then sent him back to Pilate, confident that Pilate would see the humor of it.

In v. 12, we are given this chilling comment: "Now Herod and Pilate became friends with one another that very day; for before they had been at enmity with each other." What we see here is how the cross of Christ not only UNITED his friends, it united his ENEMIES AS WELL. In the trial and death of this poor Galilean, the religion of the Jews and the pagan forces of Rome come together to destroy a common enemy- Jesus of Nazareth; human beings had never sunk so low as it had in that hour.

Well, what does this text have to say to us this evening? What can we learn from Herod Antipas or people like him? Herod is a man to be most pitied- there are many like him in this world and that may include OURSELVES, as WELL. He was born into it with every possible advantage. He was raised in privilege, was handsome like so many of the Herods, and was educated at the finest schools where he was trained to be a leader of men. But INSTEAD, he used his position, his power, and his great wealth to satisfy his own lustful pleasures. He was cruel, shallow-minded and hopelessly weak. Every advantage he had was to serve his OWN purposes rather than to help or serve the people he ruled.

I see in Herod one who represents those for whom life is the constant search for pleasure and self-gratification, persons in constant need of entertainment and endless diversion. Their GREATEST enemy becomes "silence" which was precisely what Jesus gave them, because when they are forced to contend with silence, they are forced to confront the emptiness and shallowness of their lives. I've been working on a sermon I hope to preach sometime in the future about the epidemic of loneliness we have in our country, an emotional and spiritual epidemic that is JUST as great or perhaps EVEN GREATER than the biological pandemic now afflicting this world. By forcing us to self-quarantine and maintaining social distance between ourselves, an essential defect in our character is being exposed- our rampant loneliness. Without deep and meaningful contact with other people, we're realizing how little we like being alone with ourselves. To break the tedium, we wile away every free moment with one diversion after another because we've become so darn bored with our small petty lives. Like Herod, we can't stand the silence OURSELVES because we don't especially like what we see. During the day, we get lost in our jobs and every evening, we drug themselves with our favorite beverage in front of our TV sets or any OTHER kind of distraction or diversion available to us.

We see it in so many of our young people who are helplessly glued to their computers or cellphones, who spend every waking moment constantly checking their emails or texting friends about some trivial thought or incident that might come to mind- all because they TOO fear the silence. Rather than developing relationships face-to-face with REAL PEOPLE, we attempt to stave off the loneliness by turning to chat sites or on-line dating services. I'm finding that many of the weddings I now conduct are between couples who discovered each other through their computers, that is, through an internet dating service that matches couples up according to their interests. Now there's nothing wrong with that, only that our confidence in ourselves and our own social skills seem to be ERODING while our reliance on some impersonal and artificial means linked to our technology is all the while INCREASING.

What we never seem to get is that it is only in those moments of silence, of quiet thought and contemplation, moments of real prayer and biblical reflection, where we discover what we are really all about- how we are ALL weak people with a spiritual void that can only be filled when we reach out to God. Only in those moments of silence do we ever learn the true meaning of prayer- of deep calling unto deep; of when we can hear God speak back to us, saying, "I love you and I want to fill your hunger and live in your heart." When Jesus maintained his silence before Herod, he was giving him his last chance to hear his own corrupted soul in the midst of that silence, to recognize his own need to repent of evil and open his heart up to the truth. But Herod and the scribes and the chief priests were afraid of that silence and sought to drown it out with their rising voices and erupting hatred.

However, the silence of Jesus was not only a chance for them to hear their own hearts and open their lives up to his truth, his silence was also a form of JUDGMENT upon them. For when you refuse to BE still and know the presence of God, when you live under the compulsion of always having to fill your life with a constant stream of noise and assorted amusements, with various intoxicants and other forms of distractions, then as time progresses, the heart can grow cold and our conscience numb so that we eventually become inured or incapable of hearing God's persistent calling out to us AT ALL. The inability to HEAR the voice of God, to SENSE his presence, and to KNOW what God would have us to do is the greatest judgment that could ever befall a human being. For when THAT happens, then God has stopped striving with us

and we find ourselves delivered over to the corrupt desires of our own heart to live out the rest of our lives devoid of his protection and grace.

Some years ago, Festos Kivengere--an Episcopal Bishop from Uganda--was arrested by that diabolical dictator Idi Amin and tortured daily. When Amin was overthrown and Kivengere was released, he wrote a book he entitled *I Love Idi Amin*. I heard him once interviewed about the book where he was asked, "Bishop Kivengere, how can you still say you love Idi Amin after all the terrible things he did to you? Don't you hate him for all the barbarity he inflicted- upon you personally and the rest of your people? Don't you want to see him judged for all his crimes?" The Bishop's response was one I will never forget. He said, "Idi Amin is ALREADY judged- judged by the silence of God whom he cannot hear nor sense his presence. He has no morality other than his own. His conscience is dead. He will never feel the Spirit of God move over his soul like a gentle wind reminding him of God's love. He will never understand who Jesus is or know of his peace that passes all understanding. THAT is the greatest judgment ANYONE can EVER experience. No, I cannot hate anyone who is judged so severely by God- I can only PITY him." Yes, Bishop Kivengere knew what it was like when Jesus stood before Herod that night.

This, I believe, is the case with Herod, with Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas, with Pontius Pilate, with, in fact, ANY person who would completely shut him or herself off from contact with that divine voice appealing to your heart and spirit. At some point, God may say to that person, "All right. If that is how you want to have it, I'll give you your own way. I'll no longer convict you with my Spirit so that you know right from wrong. I'll allow you to determine what is right in your OWN eyes. I'll no longer call out to you and remind you how much I love you. Your love for YOURSELF will become the ONLY love you will ever feel or know. But I warn you- such a life will be your hell. You will never be able to repent or turn from yourself or say, 'I'm sorry.'" Your fate will be sealed and there will be NO turning back."

I repeat, there is no greater judgment than the ABSOLUTE silence of God, when he removes his Spirit from us ALTOGETHER and delivers us over to ourselves. God has striven with us for years. He has made his presence known to us and his way clear before us- but we have consistently rejected God at every turn. We not only do not acknowledge God but we defiantly choose to live just the opposite of the way he would have us to walk. The Bible calls this "the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit" and at the point God removes his Spirit from us to leave us to our OWN devices- and there can be no repentance after that.

Friends, as we continue in our journey to Jerusalem throughout this season of Lent, stopping to review the various encounters Christ had along the Via Dolorosa, the road to his cross, may we pause from all our mindless and ceaseless activity to look deep within our OWN hearts this evening. May we seek some moments of quiet prayer and deep reflection, especially upon those scenes that figured so prominently in our Lord's Passion. In this way, we might more clearly hear the voice of God's Spirit ever so gently calling us to a profounder, more intimate life with himself. For if we don't, we run the risk of our lives becoming emptier and shallower, lives more complacent and self-satisfied, lives that eventually become more sensual and blind to his truth like one Herod Antipas. Let us pray...

*O God of the still, small voice, please quiet our inner spirit. There are so many other voices competing for our attention yet we know that yours is the only TRUE one. Help stem all the other distractions in our lives that we might focus exclusively on you and more clearly hear*

*your voice within. As we listen and obey your Word, may Christ become a more real presence that others may recognize you in and through our very lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*