

## **The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – Leadership Vacuum – July 11, 2021 Psalm 24 and Mark 6:14-29**

“Although Jesus is rejected in his hometown, his popularity elsewhere continues to swell,” which “draws attention away from the man Mark calls ‘King Herod.’”<sup>1</sup> This was “Herod Antipas, a son of the more famous and notorious Herod the Great” who died in 4 BCE.<sup>2</sup> Soon following his father’s death, “Herod Antipas ruled Galilee as a Roman client.”<sup>3</sup> And in our second lesson this morning, we catch a glimpse of Herod’s court.

On the surface, it has all of the trappings of earthly success. Here “we find the chief of state and his advisers, the military commanders, the leading people of the country; they are the ones who can afford leisure and pleasure; and can get what they want when they want it.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, there is also a problem. Despite outward appearances, Herod’s rule is tenuous.

As Matthew Skinner observes, “Rome chose a pompous leader to govern Galilee, and he represents a culture fueled by power and privilege that will do

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew L. Skinner, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 157.

<sup>2</sup> Skinner, 157.

<sup>3</sup> Skinner, 157.

<sup>4</sup> Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 124.

anything to extend its capacity to pursue its own desires, hold onto power, trumpet its own self-importance, eliminate criticism, and resist the justice and peace that Gods longs to bring to fruition.”<sup>5</sup> Wishing to remain in the good graces of the emperor, Herod presents himself as a loyal subject of Rome. This requires him to maintain local and regional stability through strategic alliances and the ever-present threat of violence.

At the same time, Herod wishes to be seen as a faithful Jew in the hearts and minds of the Hebrew people. The last thing that he needs is the instability of a popular Jewish rebellion to shatter his hold on power. In Mark’s Gospel, these competing interests take center stage when we learn about a matter that is simultaneously personal, political, and religious.

Herod has married a woman named Herodias. She is divorced, having previously been married to one of Herod’s half-brothers. “Intermarriage,” writes Ched Myers, “was a matter of politics among royalty, fundamental to the building and consolidation of dynasties.”<sup>6</sup> A ruler would marry a royal from another land in an effort to secure good will and to keep the peace between neighboring clans or

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<sup>5</sup> Skinner, 159.

<sup>6</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*, (Orbis Books, 1991), 215.

nations. From this perspective, Herod's marriage is politically savvy. And yet, by marrying his brother's ex-wife, the king has strayed in his fidelity to the Hebrew Torah.

In this context, "a king whose marriage might offend God would have trouble holding the loyalty of the people."<sup>7</sup> Even so, few people would have been either bold or foolish enough to name this indiscretion aloud. John the Baptist, however, has a special calling. And as a chosen prophet of God, he continues the harrowing tradition of speaking truth to power. John asserts that Herod's rule is "legitimate only if Jewish law is recognized," and quickly assumes the consequences.<sup>8</sup> Publicly rebuffed, Herod has John thrown into prison.

It comes as some surprise, then, when we learn that Herod (quote) "feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man (Mk. 6:20)." This is the same challenge that Pontius Pilate would later face following the interrogation of Jesus. In that narrative, Pilate turns to the crowds and says, "I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him (Jn. 19:4)."

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<sup>7</sup> Pheme Perkins, *Mark, The New Interpreter's Bible Volume VIII*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1995), 598.

<sup>8</sup> Myers, 216.

As is often the case in scripture, political expedience and moral authority collide. And “in Mark the court of Herod,” much “like Pilate’s court, is viewed with the cold eye of realism.”<sup>9</sup> Each ruler is “engulfed by ambition, envy, fear, and compromise.”<sup>10</sup> And on each occasion, God’s faithful witness becomes a casualty.

Our second lesson this morning is theatrically written, and teems with palace intrigue. Here we find a jailed prophet. A dancing girl. A bitter wife. And a foolish king. At the heart of this passage is the inevitable struggle between earthly and divine intentions. The scene ends grotesquely, with the image of a prophet silenced and paraded through a banquet hall in horrific fashion. There is no way to soften the effect.

In the ancient world, one’s head symbolized his or her honor. And here, Herod trades the head of John the Baptist for “the integrity of his own drunken oath (Mk. 6:24-28).”<sup>11</sup> The message for us is clear: “when corruption and pride make repentance impossible, then innocent people die.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Williamson, Jr., 124.

<sup>10</sup> Williamson, Jr., 124.

<sup>11</sup> Myers, 216.

<sup>12</sup> Skinner, 159.

Jesus understood this, which is why he warned “his followers that they too will find themselves at the mercy of ‘councils... governors and kings’” on account “of their fidelity to him.”<sup>13</sup> Suddenly, the Christian mission looks more dangerous, for calling people to repent “continues to provoke defensive and dismissive responses.”<sup>14</sup> While Herod is ultimately unmasked for his “inability to do what he knows is right,” the damage is still done.<sup>15</sup> A prophet has been killed.

Like so many who have followed him, Herod epitomizes the great temptation of all in positions of authority; namely, a “willingness to sacrifice others to maintain” one’s “honor, prestige, and power.”<sup>16</sup> This king represents the “struggle, opposition, and violence” which “answer back to those who announce God’s word.”<sup>17</sup> And what emerges is a leadership vacuum – not because Herod is ousted, but because John has been assassinated and can no longer lead his movement.

Friends, the vacuum will be filled not by foolish rulers, or by those with morally questionable intentions, but by the very Son of God, to whom many of

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<sup>13</sup> Skinner, 159.

<sup>14</sup> Skinner, 157.

<sup>15</sup> Skinner, 158.

<sup>16</sup> Perkins, 599.

<sup>17</sup> Skinner, 157.

John's followers now gravitate. Accordingly, the messianic movement is strengthened, as God's will is promoted to the ends of the earth.

Soon, we will remember our place in this movement by claiming our share of the bread of life and the cup of salvation, the good and gracious gifts of God. And we will celebrate, not how easy we have it here on earth, but that the final victory has been won through Him. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.