

# ***“John: Murdered by a Coward”***

**MARK 6:14-29**

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Four Lakes Church of Christ  
Madison, Wisconsin  
August 28, 2011**



If you have been with us over the past few weeks, then you might know that we are concluding a series of three lessons on the life of John the Baptist. Two weeks ago, we learned that John is described in the Bible as ***“a voice crying out in the wilderness,”*** his job was to prepare the way for the coming of the King, and we learned that John’s message to the people was that they were to repent and be baptized. That is, they were to prepare for the coming of the Messiah by having a change of heart leading to a change of behavior, and then they were to be dipped in water so that their sins would be forgiven. Two weeks ago, we learned that our message to the world is very similar to John’s message. Today, as back then, all people must also repent and must also be baptized for the forgiveness of sins.

Last week, we looked together at a scene from John’s life roughly a year later. As John was in prison, he started hearing reports concerning what the Lord was doing, and as a result, John started having some serious questions. So, he sent his disciples to ask the Lord, ***“Are You the Expected One, or should we look for someone else?”*** Jesus sent messengers back to John encouraging John to consider the evidence, and then the Lord praises John as the greatest man in history up to that point in time, ***“Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!”*** And then the Lord pointed out an interesting parallel between Himself and John; and that is, the message of both men was widely rejected.

As we close our thoughts on John the Baptist, I would like for us to consider a passage from the book of Mark that is “chronologically challenged.” I say this because the passage is inserted in the book of Mark at some point after John’s death, but it goes back and explains not only how John died but also how he ended up in prison in the first place. In fact, the passage is pretty much a flashback. As King Herod starts hearing more and more about Jesus, the king is terrified that John the Baptist has come back from the dead!

This morning, then, we will consider this struggle between King Herod and John the Baptist, culminating with John’s murder. Again, the passage is found in Mark, in Mark 6. We will be looking at verses 14-29, and as you are turning to Mark 6:14-29, you might want to notice what happens in those verses leading up to this passage. You might notice in verses 7-12 that Jesus sends out the twelve apostles. He gave them the power to perform miracles, He told them to take no provisions for their journey, and the Bible says (in Mark 6:12) that the apostles went out performing miracles and were proclaiming that ***“people should repent.”*** Does that sound familiar? So, the apostles go out preaching repentance, then we have this little flashback about John

the Baptist, and right after this passage the apostles return and report back to the Lord. The apostles go out performing miracles and preaching repentance, and this is where we pick up with Mark 6:14-29,

*<sup>14</sup> And King Herod heard of it, for His name had become well known [that is, referring to Jesus]; and people were saying, “John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him.”<sup>15</sup> But others were saying, “He is Elijah.” And others were saying, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.”<sup>16</sup> But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, “John, whom I beheaded, has risen!”*

*<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.”<sup>19</sup> Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so;<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> A strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee;<sup>22</sup> 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.”<sup>23</sup> And he swore to her, “Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom.”<sup>24</sup> And she went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?” And she said, “The head of John the Baptist.”<sup>25</sup> 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.”<sup>26</sup> And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her.<sup>27</sup> Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison,<sup>28</sup> and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother.<sup>29</sup> When his disciples heard about this, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb.*

As we look back at this paragraph of Scripture, I would like for us to unscramble the flashback and try to put it back in chronological order, and as we see it in time order, we will discover some very important lessons that will definitely apply to our lives today.

**I. As we look at what happened here in chronological order, we realize that the trouble started when KING HEROD MADE A DECISION TO SIN.**

Have you ever heard the song, “I am My Own Grandpa”? If you have heard that song, then you may have some idea of what King Herod’s family tree looks like! Several people have tried to diagram the situation, and I have included one of these on the front of this morning’s bulletin, but it is literally so complicated that it is difficult to fit on one piece of paper. By way of summary, Herod the Great was the king when Jesus was born, the king the wise men came to see, the king who murdered all of the baby boys in Bethlehem in an attempt to murder Jesus as a baby. He is the one who was responsible for Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt. Well, Herod the Great was married a number of times (somewhere between 5-10 wives, depending on the various sources). We have names for at least five of those wives. On the next level down, we have a number of sons—several of those sons were executed by their own father—they were murdered by Herod the Great. Herodias, by the way, was the daughter of Aristobulus (one of King Herod’s murdered sons). When Herod died, his territory was divided up among the four surviving sons. Herod Philip I married Herodias. I am not too good at

figuring out family relationships, but that means that Herod Philip I was married to his niece. Or, to put it another way, Herodias married her uncle. These two had a daughter, Salome, the young woman who did the seductive dance here in Mark 6. By the way, you might notice that Salome eventually marries Philip II. As far as I'm concerned, Salome would have been his grand-niece and (if there is such a thing) his "step-grand-niece-in-law" at the same time. But back to Herod Antipas (the king referred to here in Mark 6): Herod Antipas was first married to the daughter of Aretas, the king of Arabia. Well, at some point, Antipas traveled to Rome, fell in love with Herodias, left his first wife, convinced Herodias to leave Philip I, and the two of them got married. Just a note here: Herodias would have been not only his half-niece, but also his sister-in-law. So, basically, Herodias jumped from one uncle to another.

I think you might agree that after looking at King Herod's family tree, being your own grandpa really isn't a big deal at all! This was one messed up family! How did Herod justify leaving his wife of more than 20 years to marry Herodias? I don't know. I do know how people justify that kind of thing today: "We are in love with each other," or maybe, "Surely, God wants me to be happy," or maybe, "My first marriage was just a mistake," or maybe, "I really wasn't in love the first time." These are some of the excuses we hear today, but regardless of what Herod might have been thinking, the Scriptures are clear that Herod sinned by entering into this second marriage with Herodias.

**II. All of this brings us to the second stage of our chronological progression this morning, and that is: JOHN HAD THE COURAGE TO ADDRESS THIS ISSUE WITH THE KING.**

Let's look back very carefully at verse 18, "***For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'***" Notice: This is not something that John said once, but this was a message that John had been delivering over and over and over again. In other words, he did not just drop a little hint and then move on, but this is a message that was repeated. Again, this is something that he "***had been saying.***" There is something else I should point out here, and that is: Herod and Herodias are described as being in a "***married***" relationship. Isn't that interesting? Notice verse 17, "***For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her.***" The Bible says that Herod and Herodias were "***married.***" John, though, continued to point out to Herod that this marriage was "***not lawful.***" Let's think about this: This means that it is quite possible for someone to be "***married,***" that is, to have a ceremony, to have a certificate, perhaps even to have some kind of a preacher give his blessing on the union, to have it recorded down at the courthouse, and yet to be living in a "***marriage***" that is "***not lawful***" in the eyes of God. As far as society was concerned and as far as Rome was concerned, Herod and Herodias were married, but God's verdict on that relationship was that it was "***not lawful.***"

If you believe in writing in your Bible, I might suggest circling "***married***" (in verse 17), circling "***not lawful***" (in verse 18), and then connecting those two circles with a line. This is a very important concept for us to understand. Just because the State of Wisconsin may put their stamp of approval on something does not mean that it is necessarily "***lawful***" in the eyes of God.

Now, knowing what we know about John the Baptist, and knowing what we know about the message that John was sent to preach, what do you think John was telling Herod to do about this situation? Remember John's message? Repent and be baptized! For those with two coats, they were to share. For the tax collectors, they were to collect no more than what they had been ordered to collect. For the soldiers, they were not to take money from anyone by force, they were not to accuse anyone falsely, they were to be content with their wages. So, when John has a run-in with King Herod, his message to the king was, "***It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.***" Was he telling the king to apologize for the wedding ceremony so that he and

Herodias could continue on in that relationship? No! John was preaching repentance. John was saying, “You guys need to knock it off!” John was saying, “This relationship is not right.” ***“It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.”***

Some people have said, “Well, the only real problem here is that this was incest.” No, because when we look at Herod’s family tree, we remember that Philip and Herodias were also uncle and niece! The problem, according to John, was that Herod was married to his ***“brother’s wife.”*** He was married to a woman who was actually married (in God’s eyes) to his brother. In other words, the marriage itself was adulterous. Herod and Herodias were living in adultery. And there was nothing that John could have said that would have allowed them to continue living in that relationship. As I was preparing this morning’s lesson, I was wondering: Well, what if John had just baptized them? Wouldn’t that have erased the sin of that marriage, and couldn’t they have continued living together? And of course, the answer is “No!” Baptism cannot forgive a sin that we have not repented of. We can take an example from the world around us right now. What if two men get married to each other? Would we tell them to be baptized so that they can continue living in that relationship? Of course not! John, therefore, never got to the subject of baptism with King Herod; he was still talking repentance. Herod and Herodias had to separate, because it was not lawful for Herod to have his brother’s wife.

And thankfully, John was consistent with that message. To John, it did not matter that this man’s father was a madman who had murdered thousands of children. To John, it did not matter that King Herod had the power to throw him in prison. But to John, all that mattered was his responsibility to preach the word of God. There were a hundred ways John could have avoided being in this situation. He could have completely avoided the subject. He could have limited his preaching to things like the need to take care of the poor, etc. He could have compromised on this issue (as many have done today). However, like Jesus said in our passage from last week, John was not like a reed out there blowing around in the wind, but John was a tough prophet.

### III. So, Herod sinned and John told him that he was sinning—at this time let us move forward through the process as we observe THE DEATH OF A CONSCIENCE.

And really, it is a long process, and we see the struggle almost from the very beginning. Notice the ongoing conflict in verse 20, where the Bible says that, ***“...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.”*** So, throughout this whole process, Herod was afraid of John, he knew he was a righteous and holy man, he protected John to some degree, he enjoyed listening to John, and yet when he heard John preach he was ***“perplexed”*** by the message. I see a man who was struggling there! Herod liked to listen, but he was disturbed by the message, he was not yet ready to do what John was telling him to do. Matthew’s account tells us that Herod wanted to kill John, but he did not because he was afraid of the people, since the people regarded John as a prophet. So, it is almost as if Herod was trying to take some kind of a middle path—he was trying to respect and honor John to some degree, but there was no way he could possibly split up with Herodias. Perhaps he knew in the back of his mind that what John was saying was true, the message made him angry, but he was trying to take a balanced approach. And this continued for some time...until it all came to a head at King Herod’s birthday party.

All of the important people are there, and during the party, Salome (his step-daughter, his step-grand-niece, or whatever we want to call this young woman) came in and danced in such a way as to please the king and his guests. My understanding is that this is the only time a woman is said to have ***“pleased”*** men in the Bible, and it goes back to a word that literally refers to someone or something being “raised up.” It can also refer to

someone being held in suspense. In other words, this young woman excited these men. So, we have the picture of a room full of old men just drooling over this girl. The king makes a promise, Salome confers with her mother, and then she comes back and asks for John's head on a platter.

At this point, King Herod faces a decision. He can no longer navigate between these two ways of looking at John, but he is forced to make a decision. In verse 26, the Bible says that King Herod was *"very sorry,"* and yet because of his oath and because of his guests, in order to avoid embarrassment, the king sent the executioner with orders to bring back John's head on a platter. Herod lived his life looking for any other way but to do the right thing, and he ends up being responsible for the death of a man described by Jesus as being the greatest who ever lived.

We think of our own lives, and maybe we can remember times when we have also felt pressure to do something we know is wrong. Maybe we feel pressure from a spouse, or from our friends at school, or from our coworkers—that is the struggle King Herod was facing. He knew that what he was doing was wrong, but he went ahead and did it anyway. One warning we can take away from this passage is that what happened to Herod can also happen to us. It may start small, but when we give in and start to compromise, when we try to take that middle path, the whole thing can very quickly spiral out of control to where we ultimately do what we really don't want to do. If we ignore the conscience long enough, we get numb, we get to the point where we ignore it altogether, and that is exactly what happened to King Herod.

The paragraph ends with the disciples hearing about this, and coming, and taking John's body, and very respectfully placing his body in a tomb. We have an interesting parallel passage in Matthew 14:13, where the Bible says, *"Now when Jesus heard about John, He withdrew from there in a boat to a secluded place by Himself."* It is almost as if Jesus broke down emotionally and just needed to get away for a little while. John's death hit Him in a powerful way. However, please remember that the paragraph is not really in chronological order, so that is not really where this story ends. Remember: The account of John's death is a flashback. At the present time, King Herod was starting to hear about Jesus, all kinds of theories were floating out there concerning who Jesus might be, but King Herod was convinced that John had been raised from the dead!

#### **IV. As we close our thoughts on this passage, then, let us consider King Herod as he is HAUNTED BY THE PROPHET JOHN.**

He is not literally haunted, of course, but when King Herod starts hearing that there is a guy followed by large crowds going around preaching repentance and something about a kingdom coming, Herod starts getting a little nervous! In fact, the king seems to be horrified. I'm thinking about Lady Macbeth trying to wash the blood off of her hands. I'm thinking of the Tell-Tale Heart, the short story by Edgar Allan Poe, as the narrator of that story has committed a murder and continues hearing the beating of the heart that he has hidden under the floorboards of the house. Perhaps in a similar way, King Herod hears about Jesus and assumes that John has been raised from the dead. As someone once said, "There is no grave of man's making deep enough to bury sin." You can kill the messenger, but the message lives on. Herod might have thought that he was done with John, but he was not, because the memory lingered on.

By the way, this particular Herod is mentioned at least one more time in the New Testament, in Luke 23. Pilate was trying to deal with Jesus, and when he learned that Jesus was from Galilee, Pilate sent the Lord over to Herod who happened to be in town for the Passover. In Luke 23:8-12, the Bible says,

***When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see Him, because he had heard about Him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by Him. So he questioned Him at some length, but He made no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing Him. And Herod with his soldiers treated Him with contempt and mocked Him. Then dressing Him in a gorgeous robe, he sent Him back to Pilate. And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been enemies with each other.***

Herod, therefore, questioned the Lord at length, but the Lord said nothing—not a word! I cannot help but imagine that Jesus was thinking about His cousin John the whole time.

This morning, then, if we are worried or nervous about some sin that we are committing, let us be thankful for that twinge of guilt, and let us get it out in the open and deal with it, and let us not be tormented for the rest of our lives, let us not earn the rejection of Jesus. ***“For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?”*** (Mark 8:36). Just a few chapters later, we have another interesting statement from Jesus, and I can’t help but think that the Lord was thinking about John as He spoke, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.” We are now living in an “adulterous generation. Let us not be ashamed of what the Lord has said on that subject!

### **Conclusion:**

Like John the Baptist, the members of this congregation are looking for people who have the courage to repent of their sins. For many, this is the most difficult step in God’s plan, to turn away from sin. For King Herod, it meant realizing that his marriage was not pleasing in the eyes of God. That’s hard. For some people, repentance may involve getting out of a 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, or 4<sup>th</sup> marriage. For some repentance may mean changing careers. For some, repentance may involve taking steps to tackle an addiction. For some, repentance may involve some adjustments in the family budget. For some, repentance may involve breaking up with a boyfriend or a girlfriend. If you have moved in with each other, repentance involves moving out. Repentance can be incredibly difficult. Turning away from the denomination you grew up with may bring down the wrath of your parents. We’ve had that here at this congregation. Sitting down with your coach and explaining your new priorities may have the coach threatening to kick you off the team. I’ve seen that with a good friend of mine in high school. But the Lord is looking for people who have counted the cost and are willing to do whatever it takes.

At that point, the Bible teaches that we must then allow ourselves to be briefly dipped in water so that our sins can be forgiven. And what a blessing that is, to reenact the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, to be born into God’s family! If you have any questions, please ask. But if you are ready to follow Jesus, we hope you will let us help you with that. You can let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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