

Herod's Birthday

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Text: Matt 14:1-13a

There's a podcast on the internet in which two male hosts, and occasionally the wife of one, challenge young women who are sex workers. I don't subscribe, but I occasionally see snippets from the show on social media. I find the excuses and rationalization of these girls to be fascinating. Most of them are not particularly attractive, but have a very high opinion of themselves. But in one snippet, one of the girls used this excuse for her work, "It's in the Bible."

I've heard that excuse given for all sorts of behaviors, but mostly for adultery. People like to point to Abraham and Hagar, to David and Bathsheba, to Judah and Tamar, or to Solomon with his many wives, and excuse their own behavior with, "Well, it's in the Bible." But so is murder, theft, deception, genocide, slavery, and virtually every other sin that humans commit. I've heard the excuse, "God told me to." People will appeal to God or to the Bible to excuse just about everything they want to do.

But there are two things, or three, perhaps, that need to be said. First, the behavior of people in the Bible does not invalidate God's commands. God said, "You shall not commit adultery," and gave Moses a long list of forbidden sexual practices. Just because David sinned, or Solomon, does not invalidate God's command. As to Abraham and Judah, they lived before the law was given, and even then, their sin was manifest in the consequences they received. Second, the Bible pulls no punches when it comes to human behavior. It reveals the depths of human depravity and the desperate need we have for salvation. The Bible is not a fairy tale, not a myth, not a heroic saga, it is a plain account of human corruption. And third, God will never tell you to do what he has forbidden. God will never tell you that it's okay to violate his law. When God said, "You shall not murder," he meant it for all time for all people everywhere. When God said, "You shall not commit adultery," he meant it for all time for all people everywhere. There is a moral law laid down by the Creator that he does not violate because he is holy, and that he has given us so that we also might be holy.

And every time that someone sinned in the Bible, there was either a consequence or a prophet, or both. There was a flood, an exile, a plague, or a prophet, a Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, or a Habbakuk. Sin always has consequences. There is always punishment. In that great faith chapter, Hebrews 11, the writer praises the saints who chose *rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season* (He 11:25), because they knew that life with Christ is eternal, but sin's pleasure is short-lived. A high becomes an addiction. A dalliance becomes an affair. A drink becomes a drunkard. The pleasure is short and the consequences are severe.

Which brings us to Herod Antipas and our text. But first, let me give you a quick peek at Herod's family. Herod the Great, who ruled as king of Judea from 47-4 BC and was the one who sought to kill the infant Jesus, had ten wives. By his second wife, Mariamne, who was, by the way, his favorite, he had two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus. Aristobulus had three children: Herod Chalcis, Agrippa I, and Herodias. Agrippa I is the one who martyred the apostle James and imprisoned Peter. Agrippa had three children, Bernice, Agrippa II, and Drusilla. Bernice married her brother Agrippa and then her uncle Herod Chalcis. But Herodias is the star of our story - so far. By his third wife, also named Mariamne, Herod had Herod Philip, who married his niece, Herodias, and they became the parents of a lovely daughter they named Salome. Are you keeping up? By his fourth wife, Malthace, Herod had two sons, Archelaus and Antipas. Antipas is the tetrarch of our story in Matthew. We'll come back to him in a moment. By his fifth wife, Cleopatra of Jerusalem, Herod had Philip, who married Salome, the daughter of Herod Philip and Herodias. Salome had also been married to her cousin, Aristobulus, the son of Herod Chalcis. That's far enough, I think. We now have the key players in this drama: Herod Philip and his wife, Herodias, and their daughter, Salome, on the one hand, and Herod Antipas on the other.

Antipas took a shine to his niece, Herodias, and lured her away from her husband. Then Antipas and Herodias lived together as husband and wife without the benefit of marriage. By the way, the who inbred family was an affront to Jewish sensibilities, but no one had the courage to speak out publicly against them. Well, nobody but one "crazy" man, John, known as "the Baptizer." In fact, John didn't just condemn their adulterous and incestuous arrangement, he did it publicly and loudly. He was not shy about calling out the sin of the ruler, and, it appears, had even condemned Antipas to his face. Verse 4 says that *John had been saying to him*, "*It is not lawful for you to have her.*"

For someone obsessed with power, and with the prestige his position gave him, John was a threat that needed to be eliminated. Matthew tells us that Antipas wanted to kill John but was afraid of the people, verse 5, because they considered John to be a prophet, and Antipas himself knew John *to be a righteous and holy man* (Mk 6:20). And if we look back at Matthew 11, we'll see that Jesus considered John to be *more than a prophet* and called him the greatest of men. There in chapter 11, Jesus was responding to the queries of John's disciples. John had been arrested and was being held in Antipas' prison. He needed reassurance that his preaching had not been in vain, that pointing out Jesus as the Messiah had been the right thing.

The events of chapter 14 actually occurred sometime shortly after chapter 11, and Matthew is here reflecting back on those events. We'll come back in a moment to why the events are out of order. But first.

John had confronted Antipas with his sin, both his adultery and his incest. He was living with his brother's wife, who was also his niece. Both are forbidden by Jewish law. You can find that in Leviticus 18. And Leviticus 20 prescribes the death penalty for these sexual sins. In John's eyes, Antipas was not just a sinner, but one deserving the death penalty. Antipas was an affront, as I've said, to Jewish sensibilities. I need to note, also, that Herodias was not happy about John's accusations. Mark 6:19 tells us that *Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him.*

The consequence of John's courageous confrontation was his arrest. All Antipas needed was an excuse to execute John. It came on his birthday.

There's an insinuation here that is often passed over. That is, it may be that Antipas was also enjoying the pleasures of his consort's daughter, Salome. Salome was not an innocent. In fact, it was her sensual dancing, that in his drunken state, triggered Antipas to make a very rash promise. Verse 6, Salome's dancing *pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked*. Mark 6:23 adds, *And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."*

Perhaps knowing her mother's feelings, Salome consulted with her mother about what she should ask for. Herodias was quick with her answer, "Ask for John's head on a platter." Have the king execute John. And Antipas was trapped. In his arousal and drunkenness, he had made an oath in the presence of his guests. He could not back out. He could not refuse his niece's request, and so John was beheaded and the grisly gift carried to Salome, who passed it on to her mother, a trophy of her sin. And Matthew tells us that John's disciples retrieved his body for burial. *When Jesus heard what had happened to John, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.*

We will go on from there next time, but let's back up a bit and ask ourselves some questions. The gap between chapters 11 and 14 causes a bit of confusion. And the story of Antipas' birthday party belongs with the events of chapter 11 where John was first imprisoned. John had publicly condemned the adulterous and incestuous relationship between Antipas and Herodias. He had pointed his bony finger in Antipas' face and told him that he was living in sin, that taking his brother's wife was an abomination. John had probably insinuated that Antipas had gone much farther because of his infatuation with Salome. The whole family was an abomination to Israel. John may have, we don't know, actually told Antipas to straighten up, repent, and get his life back in order. Antipas had lost the respect of the people he ruled, and if he wanted that respect back, he needed to get his moral life straightened out. If we recall John's first appearance by the river, we know that his message was not one of condemnation, but of repentance. His call was always to leave sin, to return to righteousness, to follow the law of God. His message was that a day of reckoning was coming and the way to avoid the wrath of God was to repent. I can't imagine that John's message to Antipas was simply a message of condemnation.

The truth is, though, that some people enjoy their sin too much to have any desire to turn from it. Even the threat of judgment and hell is no deterrent to them. They excuse themselves with the silly idea that they will live long enough to repent at their leisure. "I'll have my fun now and when I'm old, then I'll repent. I'll call on God on my death bed." John wrote that men loved darkness rather than light. He went on: *Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear their deeds will be exposed* (Jn 3:20). You won't call on God on your death bed. You won't repent of your sin then. The reason is that repentance is embarrassing. You don't really want people to know what you've been up to. You don't want to admit you were wrong.

Marsha and I have traveled up and down the Pacific coast for years. We see places we'd like to visit, and tell ourselves, someday we'll stop there. We told ourselves that about the great cedar tree. Someday we'll pull off and see the tree. Well, we finally did, and the next year a storm blew

it down. We almost missed it. We've decided that those someday have to happen now. We have to take advantage of the time we have left and stop putting things off until "someday."

Antipas may have told John that he would repent someday. But then his birthday came, along with his drunken lust and foolish pride. Antipas lost his "someday" when he ordered the execution of his accuser. His opportunity to repent passed him by, and the darkness closed in on him.

And then Matthew reports, 14:1, *At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus.* He heard about the miracles, about the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the lepers being cleansed, the demon-possessed being released. He heard about Jairus' daughter. He heard about the crowds pressing in to hear words of divine wisdom. And Antipas was afraid. How do I know he was afraid? Because of the rest of that sentence, verse 2, *and he said to his attendants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead!"* Antipas attributed the miracles to a resurrected man, a man he had murdered. But this is what Antipas was thinking – "he's come back to haunt me." He's come back for me. We may chuckle because we know the difference between John and Jesus. But it sounds like Antipas hadn't even heard of Jesus until some time after he's executed John. He'd done something very wrong and he knew it, and now he thought John had come back from the dead.

Antipas will have an opportunity to meet Jesus. Luke 23 records that Pilate tried to pass Jesus off to Herod so he didn't have to. *When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased ... he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort* (Lk 23:8). But when Jesus refuse to be Herod's monkey, Herod turned Jesus over to the torturers, and then sent him back to Pilate.

I see two responses to Jesus: you will either love him or fear him. You will either draw near to him or shrink away in fear. The disciples loved Jesus. The crowds loved Jesus. The Pharisees feared him, and Antipas feared him. He tried to tame Jesus and make him perform, perhaps as a way to defuse his fear, but he feared Jesus nevertheless. You will either see in Jesus your Rescuer, or you will see him as your Judge. There really is no middle ground. Why do people reject Jesus? I think it's because they see him as a danger to them. They try to ridicule him as a way of holding him at arm's length, but they turn away; they run away; they fear him. He makes them feel guilty. His is their Judge.

So we, too, are faced with a choice. We talked last week about whether Jesus was lunatic, liar, or Lord. Today, if you realize that Jesus was neither lunatic nor liar, then you must decide how you will respond to him as Lord. Will you reject and fear him, like Herod Antipas, and perhaps try to tame him? Or will you accept and love him, and proclaim him Lord? Those are the only two options open to us. Accept or reject. Fear him as Judge or love him as Rescuer.