

A Headless Prophet and a Spineless King | Mark 6:14-29

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Introduction

It might seem surprising to go from the start of a sermon series on John the Baptist last week to his death in the second week. And we've still got two weeks to go after this!

Yet, I think it is fitting to reflect on the trajectory of the life of the man who said of Christ,

“this joy of mine is now complete, he must increase; I must decrease.”

This passage shows us that

- John was **not an armchair philosopher**, comfortably spouting wisdom sayings without incident, living in relative peace until he was advanced in years.
- Rather, John's message led to his untimely beheading by order of an impetuous king.

Today's passage presents with a contrast. A contrast between two different motivators: **fear** and **faithfulness**. A paradoxical struggle (as St. John Chrysostom says) between the **weakness of the tyrant and the power of the prisoner**.

Oftentimes, we emphasize the virtue of faithfulness without considering its cost.

- That can lead to spiritual hero worship.
- It can foster an unrealistic reading of Scripture that skims the surface and automatically identifies with “the good guy.”

- The wayward kings and bad actors function as foils, to make us feel better about ourselves.

But today, I don't want us to simply highlight Herod's faults; I want us to *inhabit* them. I want us to

- **feel the horror of being like Herod**
- before we **settle into the sweetness of being like John.**

We'll look at the passage in two parts focusing on Herod's fears in comparison to John's faithfulness. First, we'll look at **Herod's fear of John** himself (vv. 17-20). Then, second, we'll reflect on **Herod's fear of the crowd** (vv. 21-29). Throughout we'll contrast both fears with **John's faithfulness**, a **resilient faithfulness to Christ** that abides even amidst imprisonment, doubt, and eventually, death.

I. Herod Fears John (Mark 6:17-20)

The "Herod" in this passage was one of the four sons of Herod the Great who we read about in Matthew 2. Strictly speaking, Herod Antipas was a tetrarch, not a true king. A tetrarch exercised delegated rule over a region assigned by Rome.

The problem (articulated in verse 17) was that Herod Antipas had convinced a woman named Herodias to divorce her husband and to marry him, which she did. When Herod married Herodias, he abandoned his wife. This was scandalous because Herodias was married to Herod's half-brother, Philip. Look at verses 17-20 with me. 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."

Notice all of the actions attributed to Herod in the first half of verse 17.

- Herod **sent for**, **seized**, **bound**, and **imprisoned** John the Baptist.
- He did this "for the sake of" or "because of" Herodias.

- Herodias held a grudge against John. It tells us in verses 18-19, that Herodias wanted to kill John “because John had been saying to Herod ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.’”

In verses 19-20, we learn that she was not able to kill him [look at verse 20] “for **Herod feared John.**” He feared John because he knew that John was “a righteous and holy man.” Therefore, the passage says, Herod “kept John safe.”

In Matthew’s version of the account, we learn that Herod himself had wanted to kill John but instead imprisoned him “[**because**] **he feared the people**, since they held John to be a prophet” (Mt. 14:3).

This brings us to the essence of our first point. Throughout the passage, Herod acts impulsively, dangerously—murderously—in **reaction to his emotions**, and in particular, **to fear**. Consider how Herod’s emotions drive his actions in the passage.

- In verse 20, Herod “**fears**” John.
 - He feared John—not because he cared for John—but because **putting John to death would tarnish his own reputation** among his Jewish constituents.
- In verses 22-23, we learn that Herod and his guests were “**pleased**” by Herodias’ daughter’s dance. This provoked Herod to swear a foolish oath in the presence of his prestigious guests.
- Then in verse 26 we read that Herod was “**sorry** because of his oaths and guests.” Nevertheless, he still orders John’s beheading—again, for an emotional reason— “**because he did not desire to break his word**” to the girl.”

Fear. Pleasure. Regret. Desire. Practically every move that Herod makes in this story is reactionary and impulsive.

Compare this with the response from **John the Baptist**.

With John, we see a totally different pattern.

- John is motivated by truth clearly and personally spoken; not truth spoken in the key of catastrophe or prompted by emotional distress.
- In last week's passage in John 3:25-30, when John's disciples raise the emotional temperature, John does not react rashly. He calmly reflects on his own identity in light of the Messiah and says, "this joy of mine is now complete; he must increase; I must decrease." No catastrophizing. No insecurity. No sudden changes or rash decisions.
- In today's passage, in verse 19, it says "John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'"
 - The original indicates that John had been saying this to Herod continually.
 - You might also notice that it is presented in quotation marks.
 - This is to indicate that it is **a direct quote from John**;
 - but also, because **John is quoting Scripture here** (Leviticus 20:21, 'If a man takes his brother's wife, it is impurity.')

Unlike, Herod, John's speech is never **impulsive, performative, emotionally-reactionary** or **emotionally-manipulative**. John's speech is **honest, personal, consistent, and clear**. And most importantly, his speech is **biblical**.

If you look across the gospel accounts, John's speech is *always* like this; and it *always* points to Jesus (see e.g., Jn. 1:29; 3:28; 3:29-30; 3:36 Mk. 1:3).

When John speaks **it is never to tell others what he thinks they want to hear; it is always to tell them the truth**.

It is never out of fear; it is always out of faithfulness.

So, what are we to take from this first comparison of Herod and John, speech and action motivated by fear or faithfulness.

Well, making the observation only gets us so far. Herod is fearful and impulsive; John is faithful and steady. Good for John, too bad for Herod. One point for John; zero for Herod. But what difference does it make for us, for you and me today?

None of us are kings. None of us are in a position where we could abuse our power and order the imprisonment of whoever happens to offend us (and I'd hope we wouldn't do that even if we did have that power!).

We all are susceptible, however, to acting based on fear, just like Herod. We all, in a sense, stand ready to be to be imprisoned by our own fears, to be frozen by them.

We may not be tetrarchs of Galilee; but tend to set up rule as tetrarchs of our own hearts. But last time I checked, it was Jesus who was meant to govern and rule our hearts and our affections; it was Jesus who was meant to guide us even through our fears.

I worry that as tetrarchs of our own hearts, **we often ascribe to fear the loyalty of which only Jesus is worthy.**

I wonder about myself. I wonder how frequently it is actually *fear*, not faith in Christ, that motivates me; that dictates how I make decisions day to day. Fear, sprinkled with a little retroactive faith to make our actions seem sufficiently spiritual.

And wonder if today's passage might reveal that God has something better for us.

- **A way of life in which fear exists; but it isn't allowed rule us.**
- A way of life in which we are well acquainted with affliction; and yet, the peace of the Lord is our default disposition.

II. Herod fears the crowd (Mark 6:21-28)

That's the first kind of fear: Herod's fear of John. But in verses 21-28, we see a second kind of fear— Herod's fear of the crowd. It is *this* fear—"the fear of man"—that puts into motion the terrible course of events that quickly lead to John's execution.

Here we see a contrast between

- speech as **performative virtue signaling** and,
- speech as **personal truth-telling**.

Herod's speech is performative. He is exclusively concerned with **pleasing others** and **fitting in with the prestigious leaders of Galilee**.

When Herod speaks his oath to Herodias' daughter, the passage tells us it is,

- in front of "his **nobles** and **military commanders** and **the leading men of Galilee**. (v. 21).
- And in verse 26, he does not want to break his word to the girl, "because of his oaths and his guests"

In contrast, John's speech is delivered directly and personally. Look at verse 19, "**John** had been saying to Herod."

- It is not broadcast to a crowd.
- There is no ulterior motive.
- John is solely concerned with prophetic truth-telling.

John takes a stand for the truth; **but he is not grandstanding**.

John is not interested in **telling Herod off**
but in **telling Herod the truth**.

He does so in a way that is consistently grounded in faithfulness to God's word; not his own opinion.

John would have known that he was incurring great risk in doing this. He knew the danger of being a prophetic truth-teller to a tyrannical king who was more interested in being a **chameleon of his court guests** than faithful to God. To some, John's prophetic boldness might have seemed careless, even foolish. But like St. Paul after him, John seemed to know **it was better to be a "fool for Christ" than a fake for the crowd.**

How does this apply to us? I think I can say this, and it's not just directed at preachers, or teachers, or public speakers. It is a principle that applies to all believers, however young or old.

It is very hard to speak **prophetically** when you're **primarily concerned with how you're perceived**. Preaching is a type of prophetic speech. But really all truth telling is a form of it. And biblical prophecy isn't fortune telling; it's telling people what they need to hear as the Spirit brings the truth of Scripture to bear on their lives resulting in greater faithfulness to Christ.

Up until quite recently for me, my confidence as a preacher has been based primarily on my sense of my own skill, and my sense of how what I sense will be received. I have never really been concerned to make everyone 'like me.' Ten years a professor ensured that the pursuit of ubiquitous praise was a fool's errand doomed to failure and disappointment.

But it becomes very easy (in whatever your chosen field is) to understand what would people *like* to hear; and I think I had a pretty good sense of that. But prophetic preaching and prophetic truth-telling of any sort not only tells people facts about God (treating the Bible as a dictionary containing spiritual artifacts about religious people in the past); but speaks to people the living word of God. This word of God, spoken by any baptized Christian who has been filled with the Holy Spirit, is not concerned with what people might *like* to hear from God's word; but what people *need* to hear from God's word; and mostly importantly, what *God* wants and needs people to hear from his word.

Conclusion

To be alive, and to be human is to be well-acquainted with fear and trembling.

Herod makes decisions motivated by fear. Fear of his wife, Herodias. Fear of John the Baptist. Fear of the crowds. In Herod, we see a common human habit, the tendency to be motivated by fear rather than faith. And this makes us uncomfortable.

We immediately despise Herod. But we also recognize that **fear** is so often **the dominant factor** that governs

- our own decision making,
- our own discernment,
- and in some ways, even our relationships with Jesus.

It's not that we're afraid of Jesus; but in a strange way, **we're afraid that our fear may prove more powerful than him**. At least in the moments when we most need to feel strong in our inmost being.

Reading this passage and inhabiting Herod's character causes me to shudder. I suppose I dislike how familiar fear feels. I want to see myself in the hero; not in the villain.

I don't want to recognize in myself the debilitating fear of the coward king Herod. I want to find myself in the faithfulness of John.

- In John, I see someone I can admire.
- Someone I can aspire to be.
- A courageous, faithful truth-teller who acts with integrity rather than impulse.

I want to inhabit *that* character, to conform to *that* laudable saint, to invoke the spirit of *that great man*—the one who Jesus called “more than a prophet” and “the greatest man who ever lived.” And I want to boldly say with John the Baptist:

- I'd rather be a fool for Christ than a fake for the crowd

- I'd rather be a Christ-centered truth-teller than a chameleon of the culture
- I'd rather be a faithful prisoner than a fearful tyrant.
- I'd rather be a headless prophet than a spineless king

But I *can't*. As soon as those words fly out of mouth with a sense of spiritual triumph and genuine conviction, right at that moment— I fear, I doubt, I freeze.

- I fear present circumstances and I fear change.
- I fear missing out; and I fear starting afresh.
- I fear the weight of the responsibility of leading the three other souls in my charge, in my family
- I fear being wrong; but even more I fear being right, because I know what kind of courage that would require of me
- “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself” and I’m even afraid of fear.

When I read and pray Psalm 27,

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

It's not supposed to have a list of fears after it. It's meant to be a rhetorical question. Whom shall, I fear? No-one! What shall I fear? Nothing!

But then I remember that the hero of the story is

- **not a fearless John,**
- **but a faithful Jesus.**

Then I remember that true Christian courage is not based on achieving our own perfect fearlessness; it is based on Christ's perfect faithfulness.

Even John the Baptist, in prison, before he was executed, shows himself to be not a fearless, flawless stoic, but a faithful, eager servant of Christ.

Matthew 11 tells us that John sent word by his disciples from prison and asked Jesus,

“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

And Jesus answered,

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

John fears, and Jesus reassures John. Jesus doesn't say 'remember John, to remain fearless, for that is the key.' No Jesus, points to himself as the source of John's ongoing faith, so that John's faith is not eclipsed by his fear but instead, in his fear and trembling he can find himself secure in Christ.

It would be such a miss if we walked away from today's Scripture with the message “be *courageous like John, not cowardly like Herod.*”

No, just as John's faith was not founded on his own immovable fearlessness but on Christ's faithfulness, we too can be found faithful even in the midst of our fears.

Then, and only then, can the fullness of Psalm 27 function as our rally cry, away from fear to greater faith in Christ.

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

Wait for the LORD;

be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!

- 5 For he will hide [you] in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal [you] under the cover of his tent;
he will lift [you] high upon a rock.

Discussion Questions

- (1) John stands for truth but Herod is a grandstander. John delivers personal, biblically-based messages to people, while Herod is constantly practicing performative virtue signaling to appease the crowds. What practical steps can we take to ensure that our patterns of speech conform with the way of Jesus and John, and not the way of Herod.
- (2) Herod imprisoned John, but he is the true captive; imprisoned by fear that causes him to act in reactionary, catastrophizing, emotionally driven ways. How can we diagnosis the degree to which fear, rather than the power of Christ's faithfulness is the primary motivator for our actions?
- (3) Psalm 27 begins, "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?" The Psalm is meant to be rhetorical "Whom shall I fear?" Answer: Nothing and no-one. But suppose you missed the part about the Lord ("the Lord is my light and my salvation, and the stronghold of my life"), and you only heard the query, "whom shall I fear?" What fears would you list afterwards? How does re-inserting the Lord as our light, salvation and stronghold, help to loose the chains of fear that imprison our hearts so that Christ's faithfulness and our faith in him can be the default disposition of our soul.
- (4) How does impulsive action manifest in Herod's behavior throughout the passage? Give several examples. Then, explore what fears are most likely to result in impulsive action in your own lives. How can you avoid rash decisions by discerning these fears in advance and submitting them to the rule of Jesus rather than operating as tetrarchs of our own hearts.

- (5) How does John's demise make it true that it would better to be a headless prophet than a spineless king? How is that dreadful end still a motivator to pursue faithful prophetic truth-telling rather than fearful performative virtue signaling? If living as truth-tellers doesn't come with insurance from calamity, how can we have courage to live it out as our vocation when the going gets tough?