

*\*He's a real nowhere man. /*

Meet Herod. Not Herod the Great. That was his father, the first Herod, the one appointed King of the Jews by the Roman senate. The first Herod, who finished taking his throne by force. The one known as a vicious client king of the Emperor who murdered many members of his own family (including his second wife). That was the Herod who was so infuriated by the reports of the traveling astronomers about a newborn king, that he had all the baby boys in and around Bethlehem, age two and under, murdered. That's the Herod who was the reason Jesus and his parents were refugees in Egypt. /

That's not the Herod we are meeting this morning. Today's Herod is his son, one of his sons. Three of them were executed by their father. Another three of them were named Herod. There's Herod II, sometimes called Herod Philip. He's the first husband of Herodias, from today's story. And there's Herod Archelaus, the ethnarch, who ruled over (1)

half of his father's territories: Samaria, Judea, and Idumea. And, finally, there was Herod Antipas. He's our Herod. (pause) /

*\*He's a real nowhere man, sitting in his nowhere land, making all his nowhere plans for nobody. /*

I know that's kind of a strange way to describe someone referred to as a king, someone who ruled over a significant territory, Galilee and Pear-re-ah (Perea). But we know Herod, chiefly, as the man responsible for the death of John the Baptist. Fans of both the gospel of Luke and *Jesus Christ Superstar* will recall that Herod Antipas has a role in the arrest and trial of Jesus. And also, a great song. If you know, you know. Today, we are remembering his role in the death John the Baptist. And in that, he truly seems to be a nowhere man. /

This unfolds in a bizarre manner. Most of today's reading is a flashback. As our passage opens, the very first thing we learn is that Jesus' disciples are out and about doing the work they have learned from Jesus. They are proclaiming that people should repent, that wonderful Greek word, met-ah-noy-ah (*metanoia*), which actually means, to turn around; to get a new view; to see, not with our own eyes, but with (2)

God's. They are casting out demons, helping people to get free of the things that are hurting them, driving them crazy, holding them down. And they are anointing people with God's healing balm, bringing them to fullness of life and love. /

Jesus' disciples have learned well. They have learned from the master. They are all about bringing new life. (pause) /

Then word gets around, and some say, "Sounds like Elijah," others say, "Sounds like one of the prophets." Eventually word gets to Herod about the happenings in today's scripture and I think his reaction is to become wide-eyed and terrified. I can see him, looking like he's seen a ghost. His reaction is a haunted, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." (pause) /

And then, we hear the story, the story of John being beheaded by Herod. Except, it's not really Herod. It's a lackey of his, some guy with a sword whose job it is to do the dirty work ordered by the Herod. /

I don't know whether there are any fans of "Game of Thrones" here. I'm not recommending it, but I have seen it. Anyway, I am thinking of a character whom we meet in the first episode, someone (3)

who is in the show a short time, Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell in the North, also called Ned. And in our very first glimpse of him, almost the opening scene of the entire series, Ned Stark is carrying out justice for the North, the territory for which he is responsible. A deserter of the Night's Watch has been captured, a man who's left a post he'd sworn in a sacred ceremony to serve all his life. His desertion is a capital offense. So Ned, as the Lord of the North, carries out the punishment, draws his sword, and beheads the man himself. (pause)/

I'm not a big fan of capital punishment. I wonder how long it would last if we required the governors of each state to carry out the sentence themselves, personally. Anyway, it's not that Ned Stark enjoys this duty. But the weight of responsibility is upon him, and he accepts it, the good, the bad, and the ugly of it. It's immediately clear to the viewer that Ned Stark is a man of principle. He's a man of courage. And he is someone who does not delegate the ugly aspects of his job to others.

(pause) /

That's not Herod Antipas. When we enter the flashback detailing how John the Baptist came to lose his head, it becomes very clear (4)

very quickly that “principled” and “courageous” are not the first words one would think of when describing this nowhere man. /

Our passage tells us, “Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Herod Philip’s wife, because he, Herod Antipas, had married her” (Mark 6:17). This was against the religious law of the day, and John had greatly irritated the royal couple, especially Herodias, because John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” And it was Herodias who had the grudge. She did not like having her marriage called into question. She wanted to kill John. But she couldn’t, because Herod was afraid of John. Herod saw how the people responded to John. Imagine the sight of hundreds, maybe thousands of people streaming down to the Jordan River to be dunked by John in the name of turning around, turning their lives around, getting a new view, getting God’s view. (pause) /

Well, this would not be a man to trifle with. This wasn’t some unknown, unnamed scribe whom you could move out and put your own man in. This was John, kind of wild-eyed, oddly dressed, to be sure, (5)

but even more surely, this was a man of God. Everyone knew it.

Everyone. Herod included. Herod is caught in the rather uncomfortable position of being called out by this man of God. And Herod knows that John is telling the truth. (pause) /

But Herod has the power, why is he afraid? He's afraid for the same reason every tyrant throughout history has been afraid: power is powerful, but it is not as powerful as the truth. /

Theologian Douglas John Hall, wrote in an essay the following:

*The real theme of this [passage] ... is the confrontation of political power and prophetic faith. The great struggle is the struggle between the baptizer and the king ... [Herod] is by no means the standard villain. There is that within him—that “Augustinian” residue of remembrance and hope—that recognizes in the witness of John the kind of human authenticity to which he too is called. The forces of self-aggrandizement and lust that are powerfully at work within his life—and all the more at work because he does not actually possess the secure power his office boasts—are nonetheless countered by a more ancient memory of the good. / (6)*

That “memory” Hall is referring to is the beautiful summary of the human condition found in Saint Augustine’s memoir, “The Confessions,” and it goes like this: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” (pause) /

Herod rather liked John. He liked listening to John, though he found some of the things John said confusing. Imagine. Having every luxury the world can offer, everything and everyone you could wish for, at your fingertips, and yet, being dogged by the feeling that you are still, somehow, missing something. /

Our hearts are restless, O God, until they rest in you.

Herod’s fatal flaw, the flaw that is fatal to John anyway, is his essential lack of a moral core, the hollowness the crown finds when it sits atop his head. The daughter of his wife dances, and he is so enchanted by it that he makes her a promise: Anything you want. Even to half my kingdom. (pause) /

*\*Doesn’t have a point of view. Knows not where he’s going to.*

Being her mother’s daughter, there is only one thing she wants, and it doesn’t shimmer and shine like a jewel. And why does Herod (7)

agree to have the head of the Baptizer lopped off like old wood from a tree, and presented to his stepdaughter on a platter? Why, when he has that tug in his heart that tells him John is worth listening to? Why, when he, too, lives with that ancient residue of remembrance and hope that causes so many in Galilee to drop everything and run to the river? Why, when the thought of acquiescing to this evil request grieves him?

(pause)/

It all boils down to saving face. He doesn't want to be embarrassed in front of his guests. His ill-considered oath, made in front of Galilee's beautiful people, in the end, is more important to him than what he knows is right. Herod, in this moment, bows down to the god of power, rather than the God of truth. /

It would be easy to revile Herod for it, if his story didn't make you want to weep. (pause) /

In a strange way it's a hopeful story. This monarch, this son of a dreadful and murderous despot, who probably grew up knowing full well his father could have decided to kill him next. Yet, somehow, has the capacity to recognize and resonate with the good. Even when he (8)



doesn't understand it. Even when it indicts him. Even when the people around him violently oppose it. (pause) /

*\*Nowhere man, please listen. You don't know what you're missing.*

*Nowhere man, the world is at your command. /*

There is still something in him that hears the invitation to listen. There is, against all odds, some core of him that is not empty after all, but that yearns towards the good. Even after the dreadful act of having John killed, which is where our story starts. After the fact, when he hears of the work of Jesus and his disciples, he says, "I know who that is." When word gets to him of the work of helping people to see afresh with God's eyes; of casting out the demons that hurt people, and drive them crazy, and pin them down; and the work of anointing people with God's healing balm: when he hears it, he nods, and says, "It's John."

(pause) /

//// And he's not wrong. It is John. It's John, who baptized Jesus, and it's Jesus, who picked up John's work where he left off. Who took it to the streets and villages in new and unimaginable ways. And I find it hopeful, so hopeful, that even Herod Antipas, who broke the laws of (9)

God and people, who decided his reputation was the thing he most wanted to protect in the world. Even he knows the good when he sees it and hears of it. And if that is true of him... I remain hopeful. I remain convinced that there is nothing, and there is no one, not death, or life, or angels, or tyrants. Not the things in front of us right now, and not the unimaginable things in the future. Not the things and people we think of as having the power, not the highest heights, or the deepest depths. It turns out there is nothing in all creation, that can separate God's children from the love and life and full abundance of God. Not really. /

Our hearts are forever restless, until they rest in God. Thanks be to God. Amen. ////