

Mark: Dancing at Death

Mark 6:14-29

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I think it has to mean something that you're singing a hymn that's over a thousand years old, and we still believe those words a thousand years later: that the blood of the martyrs is indeed the seed of the church. And I chose that hymn, I searched in vain for the right hymn before this evening's service, last week, in our *Trinity Hymnal*. We're dealing with a very solemn, solemn account of the death and beheading of John the Baptist in Mark, chapter six. Our reading this evening occurs in the Gospel of Mark, chapter six, and beginning at verse fourteen.

And while you're looking for that, let me say that this is the last sermon in Mark for a little while. I think --Ligon and I haven't signed the dotted line, but I think we're picking this up in the fall on Wednesday nights. I think that's what we're going to do. But beginning next week and running through July and August, I begin a new series on the doctrine of guidance, and there's some information on that in that little brochure that came to you. And if you didn't get one, there's one lying around here somewhere.

Now, before we read the Scriptures together, let's come before God in prayer.

Our Father, once again we bow in Your presence. Help us not to take it for granted, the means of grace that we as but mortals can come and speak to You, the immortal, ever-living God of heaven and earth. We thank You now for Your Word, and for this particular passage in Mark's gospel, and the account of the death of John the Baptist. Though dead, he still speaks to us, and we thank You for the assurance that he is indeed alive, and that his soul is in Your presence and mingles with angels and archangels in Your praise and adoration. We pray that as we read Your Word that we might read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest all that it contains. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Mark 6:14:

“And King Herod heard of it...” (and I need to pause and explain what it is that he heard, and just before it is the account of the sending of the disciples two by two

into all of the villages and towns of Galilee, and I suggested last week that that could have taken as much as five or six months to accomplish, and during that time, and what resulted in that missionary journey of the disciples, King Herod heard of it.)

His name had become well known, and people were saying 'John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him.' But others were saying, 'He is Elijah.' And others were saying, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen!" 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. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." (19) And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death, and could not do so; for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him. And a strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee; 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." And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom." And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." And immediately she came in haste before the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me right away the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her. And immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. And when his disciples heard about his, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb.

Amen. And may God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant Word.

Patrick Hamilton was 24 years old when he died in 1528, in St. Andrew's, in Scotland. He had written a book by the name of *Loci communes*, a sort of systematic theology. And in it he had defended the doctrine that Ligon expounded on this morning: the doctrine of justification by faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. And for that, he was charged with thirteen charges--charges of heresy, and he was taken out and burnt at the stake. He was 24 years old.

This passage before us tonight is about the death, or the martyrdom, of John the Baptist. There are, in fact, only a couple of passages in Mark's gospel that are not directly about Jesus, and both of them are about John the Baptist. Jesus, you

remember, said of John, that "...among those born of women, there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist."

"I came to Irvine..." (a place in Scotland...this is an account of an English businessman who went on a trip from London to Scotland, and he's recalling the trip)... "I came to Irvine and heard a well-favored, proper, old man..." (he's referring to David Dixon) "...with a long beard, and that man showed me all my heart. Then I went to St. Andrew's, where I heard a sweet, majestic-looking man..." (he's referring to Robert Blair) "...and he showed me the majesty of God. After him, I heard a little, fair man..." (and he's speaking of Samuel Rutherford) "...and he showed me the loveliness of Christ."

Now, I daresay we would all want to hear Samuel Rutherford, who showed this man the loveliness of Christ, but in God's purposes there is a place, too, for the David Dixon's of this world: a man who will show you your heart, a man who will show you your sin, and your need. It takes an extraordinary amount of courage to be a man like John the Baptist. I suppose if you could choose who you would want to be, I don't suppose there's anyone in here who would want to be John the Baptist. You'd need therapy, I suppose, if you did.

I've been thinking about John all week: this extraordinary man, this strange man; this man who lived out in the desert; this man who ate locusts and wild honey; this man took Nazarite vows, whose hair was never cut, and so on; never imbibed alcohol; never touched the carcass of a dead person; this man whose message was always about repentance; and, he preached the law of God; he called men and women to account, and to their accountability before God. And it takes a great deal of courage and of conviction to be a man like that, especially to point out the sins of the great and powerful, like Herod Antipas.

Mark, you'll note, refers in verse 14 to Herod Antipas as *King Herod*. You know, technically, he wasn't a king. He was a tetrarch. He's one of the sons of Herod the Great. Now, it's one of those quiz questions that you have in ordination exams. There are four Herod's in the New Testament, and it's so very easy to get them confused, and I looked at several sermons in the course of the week, on John the Baptist, and several have got the Herod's confused. And I've got this feeling in my head I'm going to get one of these Herod's confused tonight!

There are four of them in the Bible. This is the son of Herod the Great. Herod the Great is the Herod who's alive when Jesus is born. Herod the Great dies at around 4 B.C., or so. And just after—I know you think Jesus was born at "zero", but that's not actually true, He was born before that, we won't go into that now—he is the Herod who is responsible for the massacre of the innocents in Bethlehem. He dies when Jesus is in Egypt. And at his death, he divides his large kingdom between his three sons, one of whom, Herod Antipas, gets the territory of Galilee (and if you've got a map in the back of your Bible, perhaps you need to look at this), but he gets the territory of Galilee to the north and west of

the Sea of Galilee, and also a strip of land going all the way down the eastern side of the River Jordan, and almost half-way down the Red Sea, the region of Perea. He's not, technically, a king. He would call himself king much later, actually after Jesus has died, by the behest of his wife, Herodias, he begins to call himself king. It gets him, as you can imagine, into an enormous amount of trouble with the Roman emperor in Rome. He gets banished to Gall, and ends up dying in Spain. Mark is writing after all of this, and I think Mark is just being a little bit sarcastic. 'This is "King Herod," you understand, the man who thought he was king.'

Let's look at this somewhat solemn account tonight, of the death of John the Baptist. His last few hours here on earth, his courage, his bravery, his resolution to follow the Lord no matter what, and it costs him his life.

I. Herod's sin.

First of all, I want us to see Herod's sin. Herod's sin. What led this man, Herod, to have John the Baptist killed? Herod Antipas married Herodias. Herodias was the wife of his brother Philip—you remember, Herod the Great has three sons, one of whom is called Philip Herod—Herod Philip—and this is the wife of Herod Philip. He marries his brother's wife. His affair with his sister-in-law was well known and widely spoken about. It had led to the divorce of his first wife. His first—follow this!—his first wife's father was also a king. He had a kingdom just to the south of Perea. His name was King Aretas. He will go to war against King Herod Antipas much later in the story that's being recorded here, and he will lose that battle.

Marriage to the ex-wife of one's brother was actually not uncommon. Actually, after all, Herod Antipas' father, Herod the Great, had perhaps a dozen or so wives, and not necessarily in succession.

Herodias—and now it gets complicated—because Herodias was also a niece to Herod Antipas, and in marrying his sister-in-law, who was also his niece, he had violated Levitical law. He had violated Levitical law, and John the Baptist, even though he is technically outside of the land of Israel as such, John the Baptist calls him to account for violating the moral law of God. And calls him, publicly, a sinner—that he has broken God's law. John the Baptist teaches God's Word to one of the most powerful figures in the land at that time. The brother of Herod Antipas, who was ruling over the territory that we would think of as Jerusalem and its surrounds, has long since gone. He actually only lasted for maybe five or six years. He made a complete mess of it, and he was removed. So, technically, there is no ruler apart from Pontius Pilate, who is the Roman delegate of that particular territory.

So here's John the Baptist: the courage, the conviction to preach God's Word, to preach God's law—John has called him into line. In verses 17 and 18, 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. For John had been saying to Herod, it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.” He wasn't talking here about what we might call “party politics.” He's talking here about God's law. He's talking here about the Ten Commandments. He's talking here about the moral code.

Herod was a powerful man. Herod had built one of the most prestigious cities in honor of one of the Roman emperors, Tiberius. He had founded the city of Tiberias, on the southwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Unfortunately, this city had been built on what was a Jewish graveyard, and this had caused not a little measure of unrest in Galilee. The people were angry with Herod Antipas. He was a Jewish leader—at least, he liked to play the Jewish card. Apparently Herod Antipas would occasionally go to Jerusalem, and he would celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. You remember what Jesus called Herod Antipas: “that fox,” He called him. “That sly fox.” And John the Baptist, the courage of it! It's like John Knox, isn't it? If you've ever read the story of John Knox in the early Reformation in Scotland, calling Queen Mary --“Bloody Mary,” as John Fox came to call her—calling her to account. You remember what Bloody Mary, Queen Mary said of John Knox, that she “feared his prayers more than the gathered armies of Europe.” And here is John the Baptist. The courage of it! Calling public officialdom into line with the moral code, the moral law of God.

We live in an age, you and I, when public sins of this sort are common. Yes, they are. We've just lived through a period where our own president questions the meaning of what “is” means. Over this very issue.

And here is John. Think about him for a moment. Let his courage, let his steadfastness, let his zeal for the honor and the integrity of the law of God seep under your skin a little. Because this was Herod's sin. He called King Herod, Herod Antipas, the ruler, the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea—he called him a sinner, and called him to repentance before the justice of God.

II. Herod's conscience.

The second thing I wanted us to see is Herod's conscience. Herod's conscience. The historian, Josephus, tells us that John was executed in a place called Machaerus. Now, if you can imagine a map of Palestine during the time of Jesus, and if you've got one in the back of your Bible, just take a look at it. You see Galilee up in the north, and then the River Jordan. Then, down below you've got that long stretch of water, the Dead Sea. And to the east of that about half way down and to the east, you'd find Machaerus. On the other side of the Dead Sea, you've got places like Hebron and En Gedi. So it's a long way from Tiberias. It's desert. If you go there today, today it's in western Jordan, of course, but if you go there today, it's a hilly, woodless, desert. It's a rocky desert.

And on one of the promontories was built this magnificent palace. Herod the Great had begun this great building, and Herod Antipas, the son, completed it. And this is where he would go for his summer vacations—like many of you would go down south to the beach, somewhere, Herod Antipas would go to this place called Machaerus. Josephus describes Machaerus as “magnificently spacious, with beautiful apartments.” And deep under the palace were dungeons, and in one of these dungeons (and by the way, you can go and see the dungeons—you won’t see any of the palace, that’s long since gone—but you can actually visit the dungeons. To this day you can see some of the iron work that—well, according to archeologists may well go back to this very period of time, and may be some of the iron work in which John the Baptist would have been tied to). And deep in those dungeons, John the Baptist was imprisoned, and bound. And Herod—and imagine this—Herod would go down there, and he would listen to John the Baptist. Evidently, John the Baptist would preach to him. John the Baptist would open up the Word of God to him. He’d bring before him his great need, his sin, that he had violated the law of God.

Now think about it! Why would King Herod, why would this powerful, powerful man—why would he be afraid of this wild man from the desert? This crazy man from the desert? Why would he be afraid of him? Why would he need to lock John the Baptist in a dungeon in this fortified palace in the middle of nowhere? For the same reason that modern Islamic countries are frightened of Christians who display their godliness and their zeal and commitment for the truth of the Word of God. Why did Mary, Queen of Scots, say that she feared the prayers of John Knox more than all of the assembled armies of Europe? Because the testimony of godliness is powerful! It’s powerful.

Herod knew that he was wrong. That’s the point. He knew that he was wrong. And that’s why we’re told in verse twenty, he tried to protect John. Protect him? Yes—from his wife. This powerful king, this powerful figure, is trying to protect John from his wife! This man would speak to Herod’s conscience. You remember there is another figure in the Bible very similar to this one, Felix, who in very similar circumstances would go to the Apostle Paul and listen to him preach, and then when Paul, as it were, got under his skin—as you say, Paul began to meddle—he would shush Paul up and say “no more! I will hear about this some other time.” And he’ll send him back to his cell.

Do you see what this is saying, my friends? That it’s not enough to have one’s conscience touched by something. You can go to hell with a bad conscience—you can go to hell with a bad conscience. Herod had a bad conscience. John the Baptist was like someone touching a sore. John the Baptist, as he brought the law of God, was like somebody exposing something that’s sore. And Herod...Herod had a bad conscience.

III. Herod's wife, Herodias.

But let's look in the third place at Herod's wife, Herodias. As you can imagine, if John was saying this marriage was more or less incestuous, you can imagine that she nursed a grudge against John the Baptist. And she wants John dead. It's a Lady MacBeth figure, isn't it? This is Lady MacBeth urging MacBeth when he's capitulating, and he's lost all of his fiber and energy, and she is the one motivating him. She is the one who gets her hands bloody! It's Herod's birthday. Do you know this is the only place in the Bible where a birthday is actually mentioned?

And it's a grand, grand occasion. And there is this enormous party that must have taken weeks to organize. Herod has invited all of the important folk in office and in the military, and those up in Galilee, and they'd take several days, perhaps weeks, to get from Galilee to this nowhere place called Machaerus. And there's a party, and there's food like you've never seen, and there's wine like you've (hopefully!) never seen, and there's a show.

And, my, what a show it is! The queen's daughter—not Herod Antipas' daughter, you understand—but the daughter of his wife's former husband. She dances before him. Her name (and again, it's Josephus who tells us this), of course, is Salome. It's the stuff of great literature and opera. Some of you know Richard Strauss' grand opera, *Salome*. It's-- some of you might know Oscar Wilde—hope you don't know Oscar Wilde's book called *Salome*. This was a men-only occasion. You notice that this girl has to go outside to speak to her mother. Her mother isn't there. It's a men-only function. I don't need to spell it out to you, do I? They're drunk. What's taking place is obscenity. She's probably a young girl; it's conjectured she might have been fifteen or sixteen years of age. And she's got Herod in the palms of her hands. She dances, and Herod is taken with her, and this sop of an individual says to her, if you do the dance of the seven veils—that's basically what he was saying—I'll give you whatever you want, up to half of my kingdom.

And she goes out, she asks her mother. And do you notice, it's instantaneous: her mother says “ask for the head of John the Baptist.” And she goes in, and she says to Herod she wants the head of John the Baptist. And Herod is stunned. He's caught! Because there's a half of him, there's a part of his conscience which knows that this is wrong! But he's given his word, he's given an oath, and all of these guests are here, these important people. He can't step down from this. He can't be seen to be a man who breaks his word. And he sends the executioner to the dungeons, and John's head---he's beheaded. She asks for John's head on a platter.

It's shocking, isn't it. It's awful. It's disgusting. Do I need to describe...?... some of you ladies are shaking your heads. These are two women who asked for this: Herodias and her daughter.

And John is executed. He's dead. There are no last words from John the Baptist. No great speech, like some of the Covenanters who were executed for their faith, and they gave these monologues that were recorded and taken down in shorthand, and we can still read them. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* records all of them for us. Famous last words of Christians who were put to death. There's nothing from John the Baptist. He probably knew very little about it. It came all of an instant to him.

A man's lust got him into this. That's the power of it. You mess about with lust, men, and you think it's a small thing, and it's a trifling thing, and it breaks your marriage, and it breaks up your home and it breaks up your reputation. Lust led to this.

You know, this is what happens to one of God's choicest saints. Come to Jesus, and you might get your head cut off: there's the message. It must have stunned the disciples when they heard it. You follow Jesus, and you could get your head cut off. Many of us are thinking of that South Korean in Saudi Arabia, who was apparently a professing Christian. I don't know the details. You know, later Herod would come face to face with Jesus. He'd ask Him many questions, his conscience still troubling him. I'm sure he had nightmares, and he especially had nightmares when he heard the reports of this mission up in the cities and villages of Galilee, because he kept saying to himself, 'this is John the Baptist, and he's risen from the dead! He's come back to haunt me!'

IV. Application

What are we to make of all of this? Let me say quickly three things—very quickly. There's a pattern to sin and temptation. You understand that. There's morphology to sin and temptation, that one sin will lead to another. If you can justify one sin, you can justify two, you can justify three, and you can justify ten or twenty. And rather than repent of the first sin, Herod performs more and more sins to try and cover up for the first sin. And that's what sin is like. You're always a slave to it, and you're never its master. The second thing is that unconfessed sin will harden your heart to Jesus Christ. You know, when Herod met Jesus on the night in which Jesus was betrayed, you might think that Herod was ripe for the plucking, as it were. But his heart was hardened, my friends. His heart was hardened because he had refused to repent of his sin. And the third thing I want us to see, and it's this, my friends: that there are some things for which we must be prepared to die. Surely that's a lesson from this passage. There are some things for which we must surely be prepared to die.

I wonder what you would die for tonight. For the honor and glory of Jesus Christ? We all long that we would be like that in the hour of death. You know, in the 1680's—oh, we're forty years after the Westminster Assembly—it was said that

there were three books that were read in every Christian home in England: the Bible, of course; John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; and *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*.

You remember in *Pilgrim's Progress*, it's just after Christian has passed through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and he comes out on the other side, and there's a cave. And there's an old man standing in the cave, and strewn on the floor are the corpses—bodies, bones and ashes—of dead people. And this old man says to Christian, “You will never mend till more of you be burned.” That sounds really strange, reading it today, I suppose. In the 1680's it made a whole lot of sense. It was Bunyan who was in prison, remember. It was Bunyan reminding the Christian public that it costs something to follow Jesus, and it may cost you your life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*, in which he said, “Every commandment of Jesus is a call to die.” And on April 9, in 1945, three weeks before the end of the Second World War, the Nazi's took him from his prison cell in Flossenbug and hanged him.

My friends, what are you prepared to die for? As you think about John the Baptist tonight? And though dead, he still speaks to us. Think of that. What am I prepared to die for? Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, this is such a solemn passage. Could we dare to pray that You would make us like John the Baptist? We feel ourselves so weak, and so easily led to compromise at the slightest provocation of trial. Steel us, give us courage. Help us to love You more than this world. And grant that the life of John the Baptist, as it reflects something of Jesus, might impress itself upon our souls and characters. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction. *Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.*

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