

“Who Is Jesus?”

(Part 2 of 2)

a sermon by

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Text: “But when Herod heard of it he said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised’” (Mark 16:6).

Last week I spoke of the urgent and demanding human desire to be the first, the best, or the most important at something; and the propensity of this desire to lead us astray. Today, I shall speak of the opposite, competing inclination – the willingness to be the very last person to come to a particular conclusion; that burning desire, even in the face of overwhelming evidence, to remain the naysayer.

In many respects, the chronic naysayer considers himself or herself to be the most wise person in any particular conversation. This is the person that holds special knowledge and insight. The skeptic is the one who has the singular capacity to spend better, to build stronger, and to complete any task with the greatest efficiency.

The only problem with the perpetual naysayer is that it simply is not true. They perpetual naysayer and the pathological skeptic are never required to demonstrate that their ideas actually work. Their focus is solely on the error of others. These individuals rarely if ever call attention to their own inability to succeed where others have failed.

The naysayer and skeptic don’t always remain on the side. Often they may even find themselves in positions of great influence and importance. Such was the case of Herod, the tetrarch. Though he possessed great power and wealth, the Biblical narrative portrays him as one who is chronically skeptical.

Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch

The text that we have before us is fascinating. Fascinating not because of its insight into the heart of God. This text is fascinating because of its clear, unique and important insight into the heart of human nature.

As you may remember from last week, at this time the person and work of Jesus were gaining in notoriety. The Gospel of Mark mentions repeatedly the crowds that continually surround Jesus.

Jesus crosses over water and a crowd was waiting to meet him when he arrived at the shore (5:21).

Jesus walked along a road and a great crowd followed and “thronged against him” (5:24).

Last week we read that Jesus traveled to his home town accompanied by his disciples. There he encountered another crowd. But this group included people who refused to believe (6:1-3).

There is something about the person and work of Jesus that calls out for the attention of people. This is true for people who live in great need. This is also true for people who live with great abundance. The person and work of Jesus even called out for someone with the wealth and power of Herod.

The mere mention of Herod's name usually brings some particular image to mind. In the Christian community, these images are often influenced by the few times that Herod is mentioned in the New Testament narrative. Our impressions of Herod are often clouded by the fact that there was a whole family of interrelated people, the Herodian Dynasty, several of whom were known by the same name.

Though we tend to have grandiose images of this man, the New Testament in fact speaks of several people, all of whom were interrelated, each bearing the name Herod.

Matthew's Gospel introduces Herod the Great, when the magi appear seeking the King of the Jews (2:1, ff.); again Herod the Great is mentioned when angels tell Joseph of Herod's death (2:19, 22). Later the Gospel of Matthew tells this story of Herod Antipas (the son of Herod the Great) and the order that John the Baptist be killed (14:1, ff.).

The Gospel of Luke mentions Herod the Great when placing the narrative events in history (1:5, 3:1). Later, Herod Antipas is said to have imprisoned John (3:19), but the only mention of John's death comes from Herod's comment that the work of Jesus cannot be attributed to John because of John's death (9:9, 7); Pharisees warn Jesus of Herod Antipas and of his desire to kill Jesus (13:31). Finally, Herod Antipas appears at the trial of Jesus (Luke 23:7, ff.). Herod Antipas had hoped to see Jesus, and perhaps even to witness some sign being performed. As the Gospel of Luke tells the story, "Herod with his soldiers treated him [Jesus] with contempt and mocked him; then, arraying him in gorgeous apparel, he sent him back to Pilate."

Perhaps the most fascinating, if not gory, tale of the Herod family is found in the Acts of the Apostles. Herod Agrippa, a grandson of Herod the Great, started to persecute those who proclaimed 'Jesus is Lord.' Peter has been arrested and was sleeping, chained to guards on either side of him. In the middle of the night, an angel of the Lord appeared and led Peter to safety. Herod Agrippa was angered by Peter's escape. (This particular story of Peter's escape just happens to be the story that the children are learning at this very moment.)

The Gospel of Mark tells correctly of the bizarrely incestuous relationships as an important part of this story. Herodias, a granddaughter of Herod the Great, was betrothed to Herod the Great's son, Herod (also known as Philip). In this marriage Herodias gave birth to a daughter, Salome. "While Herod Antipas was visiting the residence of his half-brother Herod Philip, Herodias became interested in Antipas and agreed to divorce Philip for Antipas." In trading husbands, Herodias became the wife of a very powerful political leader.

I have no doubt that you will forget the details of the family tree, if it can be called a tree. But, I am confident that you will remember that the family dynamics were different from something that you would find on Walton's mountain. With such a very shallow gene-pool, it is difficult for us to track the family tree. So, for today, let it be enough to remember that this was not the healthiest of families and that Herod Antipas killed John the Baptist.

The New Testament tells of the very plausible story that Herod was caught up in the passion of a great banquet, making a promise that should never have been spoken" "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom."

At her mother's suggestion, the girl's request was very clear, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

"And the king was exceedingly sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard and gave orders to bring his head. He went and beheaded him in the prison,²⁸ and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother."

Herod was presented with a difficult decision: He could refuse the girl's request and be embarrassed in the middle of this grand celebration; or, he could execute an innocent man. Well, it appears that the decision was fairly simple for a man whose wife is not only his father's sister's daughter, but also his half-brother's ex-wife. (Could even Dr. Phil make any sense of this family?)

Josephus, the great historian of the first century, speculated that Herod considered John the Baptist to be a political threat and that this influenced the decision to have John executed. But, regardless of the reasons behind the decision, Herod Antipas made the conscious decision that John was to be executed. In time it seems that Herod regretted his decision.

It happened eventually that word of the person and work of Jesus reached the ears of Herod Antipas. Immediately, Antipas knew exactly what to make of this person; “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

In this Herod Antipas proved to be a skeptic and a naysayer. And, like so many who have since followed him, Herod was wrong. He was wrong. He was wrong. He was wrong. And, no matter how many times I say it, my words cannot adequately convey the magnitude of Herod’s error. He was wrong about the person and work of Jesus.

Herod Antipas was not the first who failed to understand the person and the work of Jesus. Herod Antipas most certainly was not the last person to make this same mistake.

The Mistake of Modern-Day Skeptics

Last week I spoke of some of the sweeping and popular trends of Biblical scholarship. For some 1800 years following the resurrection of Jesus there was little, if any critical assessment of the writings included within the New Testament. For the past 200 years, there has been an ever-increasing amount of skepticism as writers sought to distinguish between the *Jesus of History* and the *Christ of Faith*. For the past 20 years, this skepticism has been refined into something of an art form. A group of individuals, calling themselves *The Jesus Seminar*, are working, as they say, to “liberate” Jesus from the faith of the church. In the absence of any real information that might support their claims, this groups resorts to using press kits and media interviews to sell their books to an unsuspecting public. (Just in case you missed it, you should know that I am *not* a fan of their work.)

Today I am not speaking of the errors of a group of people. I am speaking instead of the error of an individual. Herod’s statement came from an individual. Then, as now, Jesus calls out to individuals. Some respond with great faith. Others remain skeptical. The real problem with this kind of skepticism is that it truly is nothing more than the irrational gibberish that demands nothing of the one who is speaking. This was exactly the error of Herod Antipas.

In the presence of people speculating about the identity of Jesus, this rising political star stopped the conversation with his declaration. But, notice how the conversation had progressed.

“King Herod heard of it; for Jesus’ name had become known. Some said, ‘John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him.’ But others said, ‘It is Elijah.’ And others said, ‘It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.’”

“But when Herod heard of it he said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.’”

Curiously, Herod Antipas placed his *imprimatur* upon and gave credibility to the answer that placed himself and his authority at the center of events. Others speculated this to be the person of Elijah, or perhaps a new prophet, “like one of the prophets of old.” Given these choices, Herod Antipas rejected the possibility that this could be a religious phenomenon that was greater than or unrelated to him.

Herod was a thoroughly modern man; perhaps even 2,000 years ahead of his time. Even today, skeptics and their ideas are not without merit – they never are. But, that does not make them right.

The Truthful Tension

The Gospel of Mark can be difficult to read and it certainly presents certain difficulties for its readers. To begin with the text does not provide a complete, sequential chronology of Jesus’ life and actions. Attempting to reconcile these chronological discrepancies is not easy. “The alternatives we face are, either follow the text, which leads to absurdity, or leave the text, which is to admit the text will not provide us with a sequentially accurate chronology.”

Even a simple reading of Mark’s Gospel makes clear the fact that this writing was not intended to be a careful retelling of historic events. This is *not* to say that these events did not happen. It is simply to state that any attempt to understand the Gospel of Mark requires us to look to the narrative itself to find Mark’s intended theological point of the story.

So, then, what can we say of this important, intended theological point? The Gospel of Mark tells of two very different perspectives of the life and work of Jesus. “Mark’s audience is left to wonder: powerful teacher and rejected Messiah – how can Jesus be both? The key to understanding Mark’s narrative is to take it as a narrative, and this narrative both affirms that these two presumably competing portrayals are true *and* insists that Jesus’ true identity cannot be grasped apart from the correlation of these two portrayals.”

Throughout the Gospel of Mark there is a tension between the Jesus of history, the man who is mocked and doubted. This is the man who was crucified and buried. But across from this Jesus of history remains the Christ of faith. This is the one that was raised from the dead and who continues to live, even today. This is the Christ of faith.

This tension between the Jesus of history and the Christ of Faith continues and it is within this tension that we must live today. There was the Jesus of history; and, as our critical skeptics remind us, he was killed – dead and buried. Their point is not without merit. But, that merit does not make them right.

There does remain today the Christ of faith; and, in our faith we proclaim him to be alive and active in the world today – giving help to the helpless, finding the lost, restoring life to the dead and dying. The ferocity and tenacity of our doubting, skeptical world cannot unravel this truth.

As you go out into the world, you will find yourself being pulled apart by this tension. We are called to live in this tension. We are called to live – held tightly in suspense – within this tension created by the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

This tension was demonstrated during Winston Churchill’s State Funeral. Churchill died in 1965 and his funeral was held in St. Paul’s Cathedral. As the Pall Bearers lifted his casket and proceeded down the aisle towards the door, a single bugler began playing Taps – the melancholy, audible sound signifying the end of a day, the end of a life. As the somber, methodical pace of the casket brought it near the back of the sanctuary, Taps continued to be played. But, another bugler began to play revile, a call and announcement to gather and to begin a new day of service. Eventually, Taps was finished, but the call to revile continued a bit longer. Eventually, all that remained audible was the echo, and the tension between death and life.

In preparing for his funeral and asking for this musical signal, Winston Churchill demonstrated an appreciation for the tension in which we live. In truth, our death is so certain that we might just as well be carried to our gravesite. But, also in truth, we are alive – not only in this world, but also in Christ Jesus. As surely as God is alive now, at this moment, so too shall we be alive in his kingdom.

Yes, life is hard and suffering is real, doubt has circled round about us. Let us acknowledge and respect the difficulties with which we live. Let us remember this each time we hear the melancholy tune of taps. But, more than that, God is alive. We are being called to gather together and to serve. Not even death will excuse us from that duty and privilege.

Regardless of what the world may say about the person and the work of Jesus, regardless even of what we believe, the truth is and shall remain what it is. The truth of Jesus Christ gives to us much more than it demands from us. But the greatest trouble with truth is this: The truth right here in your presence waiting for you to respond.

What now shall you do? How will you respond?