

Readings: Mark 6:14-29, Amos 7:7-15, Ephesians 6:11-20

Before I begin, I would like to pray ... Lord, as I share a reflection on this difficult passage from Mark's gospel, I pray that "the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, my Rock and my Redeemer."

This passage is such a horrible one, it almost feels like it belongs in an unrated Netflix series ... On the other hand, those of us who watch the news and pay attention to reports coming out of areas where war is being waged, know all too well that this dark side of human nature is still very real. A secular version of "speaking truth to power", the crime writer Peter R. de Vries, was shot at the start of this last week, as he was doing research into organized crime here in the Netherlands. And in recent history, there have certainly been more than one journalist who has been killed, trying to get the story of the truth out into the world.

But back to our gospel reading. The story of this second Herod, Herod Antipas, is one which can be a cautionary lesson to us all. In fact, my Life Application Study Bible says that he was a man who experienced both guilt and shame, and I suspect that most of the adults listening can identify with feeling either guilt or shame or both.

Guilt because he knew that he had done wrong, by deciding he wanted another man's wife, in this case his half-brother, Philip. So, he married Herodias, and when John the Baptist came to baptize in the Jordan, he preached a baptism of repentance, and was apparently very clear that Herod and Herodias needed to repent for what they had done.

It is also clear that Herodias didn't like having truth spoken into her life, so we have the reasoning behind Herod arresting John, in fact, the text states that Herodias actually wanted to kill John, but as it says in v 20 Herod "feared John,

knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him.” I find this next sentence so very telling ... “When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.”

I find myself wondering ... if it hadn't been for Herodias, for his misguided desire for her, would Herod perhaps have been a different person? Is this a case where the result of one sin early on, when it is not repented of, leading to greater sin later?

Herodias found her opportunity later, using her daughter as a pawn to get what she wanted ... we have to first get over the confusion about the names ... we have a Herod – the king, a Herodias - his wife, and a Herodias - their daughter ... In the story, the daughter dances, the father wants to indulge the daughter, the daughter wants to please her mother and asks the mother what she should ask for, and the probably teen-aged daughter adds her own extra flourish to the request ... “on a platter” and then the father is stuck because he doesn't want to embarrass himself in front of his guests... talk about a dysfunctional family.

And then we get to the next part ... in verse 26, it says “the king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her” ... So Herod did what he actually didn't want to do because he allowed his pride to get in the way of doing the right thing ...

We only meet Herod one more time in the gospel records ... in Luke 23:6-12. Let me just set the stage, Jesus has been brought before Pilate, who has just stated that he (verse 4) “finds no basis for a charge against this man” , against Jesus, but then he was told that Jesus came from Galilee, so he sends him to Herod.

“⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort. ⁹ He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ The chief priests and the teachers of the law were

standing there, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹ Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. ¹² That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies.”

Again, we have a situation where Herod actually shows some superficial signs of interest ... “he hoped to see him perform a sign” ... but then, it fizzles out, because Jesus doesn’t play the game he wants to play, and so, he gets like a spoiled bully, we all know the type from school, who just is cruel and mocking because he or she can be..

All in all, the story of Herod is an ugly one, and it’s actually easy to just look down upon him and his illegal wife, Herodias. However, this morning, I would like to look at the ways that we can actually examine our own lives with regard to this scripture passage ... is it possible that, like Herod, I have heard someone pointing out, using the Bible, that something that I have done is wrong? Have I gotten angry at the person who has said it? Have I maybe skirted around the person, wanting to know more, but actually always refusing to repent?

Maybe, like Herodias, the mother, I have done things in the past that I know are wrong (like, in her case, having an out of bounds ambition in deciding she would rather be married to the king, instead of the kings’ brother), and I don’t want to be reminded of them?

Or maybe, like Herodias, the daughter, I have gotten caught up in something I really don’t understand, but in trying to be one of the cool kids, I have said something or done something that was just downright cruel and vicious.

Or maybe, like Herod again, I have rashly said I would do something, and then, when it became clear that it actually wasn’t the right thing to do, I have been more concerned about saving face than I have been about doing the right thing.

Or maybe, life has been so good and easy for me that I think that I actually deserve to have everything precisely the way I want it, and it never occurs to me that just because I want something that it might not be the right thing.

The story itself ends badly, but I find myself wondering what might have happened if there had been some repentance, a different response to being told about the sin.

In fact, the Bible tells us a great story about someone who actually listened to a prophet speaking truth to power ... In 2 Samuel 11, we hear the story about what happened when another king decided he wanted someone else's wife ... it's the story of David desiring Bathsheba, David having Bathsheba, and David orchestrating the death of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, when it turns out he had gotten Bathsheba pregnant. Sounds almost as much of a Netflix thriller as our gospel reading. Except there is a difference ... Reading on, in chapter 12, it was the prophet Nathan who came to David and told a story about another man who sinned ... David responded with much self-righteous anger, claiming that the man should be put to death for his sin, and then Nathan turns and says "YOU ARE THE MAN". And David responds, "I have sinned against the LORD". And that is as simple as that. Repentance is about recognizing when someone is speaking a hard truth into our lives, and responding by turning away from our own sin.

When it comes down to it, we want to be like David, who, despite the many tales in the Bible where he doesn't actually do the right thing, is still remembered as a man after God's own heart ... We all know at least one David, but it's not so common that a mother decides to name her son Herod ... for good reason ... and so, we need to do what David did, again and again.

We are about to shift to the next part of the LORD's prayer, the "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us" part ... as we prepare for this, I have asked the Helder's to lead us in a song that is taken from Psalm 51 that David wrote in the wake of recognizing his sin against the Lord. As we listen and sing along, I pray that we will be open to the Holy Spirit's guidance, trusting in Him to show us the little sins in our lives that could grow into horrible ones, if we don't turn back.