

Come Holy Spirit; open our hearts and tune them to your Word.

It helps while reading the Gospel narratives to remember that there are two different Herods—Herod the Great, the villain of Matthew’s stories of the wise men and the Holy Innocents, and his son, Herod Antipas, the Herod who appears in stories of the adult life of Jesus. The Herod who was the object of the rebuke of John the Baptist.

Josephus, the Jewish historian who provides us with a valuable, if biased, sense of the context of the world in which Jesus lived and the Church evolved, suggests that Herod had John beheaded because he perceived John’s popularity as a potential threat to his own power and security, someone whose imprisonment could incite rioting. Likely enough, but Mark and Matthew tell a different story.

Herod Antipas early in his reign married the daughter of the King of Nabatea, to the south and east of his territory along the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. It was a political move, and Herod soon became bored with her and turned his eye to Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. Note that the text does *not* say the widow of his brother Philip, as we might be tempted to assume. The dates don’t work for that to be the case during the life of Jesus, much less that of John the Baptist. Herod Antipas was at best married to his brother’s ex-wife, or at worst, the marriage was bigamous. In any case, the second marriage was no

doubt well underway before the first one officially ended, if it ever did.

To further complicate things, Herod Antipas and Herodias were related by blood. She was Antipas' niece, though that would not have been condemned in all circles; it should be noted that she was Philip's niece as well.

We're not sure what John's specific objection to the marriage of Antipas and Herodias was, but he stated his opposition forcefully and publicly: "It is not lawful for you to have her."

A millennium before, the Israelites had come to Samuel and demanded a king. Samuel laid the matter before the Lord, and I read the account from I Samuel, chapter 8, from The Message paraphrase:

So ...delivered GOD's warning to the people who were asking him to give them a king. He said, "This is the way the kind of king you're talking about operates. He'll take your sons and make soldiers of them—chariotry, cavalry, infantry, regimented in battalions and squadrons. He'll put some to forced labor on his farms, plowing and harvesting, and others to making either weapons of war or chariots in which he can ride in luxury. He'll put your daughters to work as beauticians and waitresses and cooks. He'll conscript your best fields, vineyards, and orchards and hand them over to his special

friends. He'll tax your harvests and vintage to support his extensive bureaucracy. Your prize workers and best animals he'll take for his own use. He'll lay a tax on your flocks and you'll end up no better than slaves. The day will come when you will cry in desperation because of this king you so much want for yourselves. But don't expect GOD to answer."

But the people wouldn't listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We will have a king to rule us! Then we'll be just like all the other nations. Our king will rule us and lead us and fight our battles."

Samuel took in what they said and rehearsed it with GOD. GOD told Samuel, "Do what they say. Make them a king."ⁱ

Though kings of Israel were no longer allowed to wage war under Roman rule, and Rome provided its own soldiers, Herod the Great *is* remembered for his ambitious building projects: the most notable being the expansion of the Jerusalem Temple, to which history has attached his name. He also built the port city of Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean Sea; and fortresses at Masada, on the northwest corner of the Dead Sea; and at Herodium, just south of the Dead Sea. All those monuments to the greatness of Imperial Rome (and to that of the Herod family) were built on the backs of the common people. John applied in his own time the plumb line by which

God had instructed Amos to measure the uprightness of God's people seven centuries before.

All the prophets rail against injustice and oppression, but Amos is particularly scathing in his condemnation of the yawning wealth gap, and the indifference of the rich and powerful to the plight of the poor. In the time of John and Jesus and Herod, despite the primacy of professional standing armies, Empire still could take sons now and then as fodder for wars in which the fighters had little or no personal stake. Taxes were confiscatory and fees exorbitant. Labor for public works was forced at worst and poorly compensated at best. At the slightest hint of criticism of the status quo, the response was swift and brutal.

Herod had some respect for John the Baptist and his message, so much so that when he heard about Jesus, he became convinced that John had returned from the dead. But that respect seems to have been based more in curiosity than in commitment to the principles of the reign of God that John and then Jesus embraced and proclaimed.

Herod's vague attraction to the Baptizer and his message was not sufficient to override the influence of Herodias' venom against John for declaring their marriage illegitimate, and it was not enough to keep him from celebrating his birthday by executing the prophet at the behest of a teenager who pleased him and his companions with her exotic dancing. It was not enough to make him

refuse her outrageous request rather than lose face with his cronies after making an impetuous and ill-advised promise.

Herod will appear again, in Luke's Gospel, as Jesus is questioned by Pilate. What we have here is the religious dimension of Empire interacting with varying political dimensions of Empire. All four Gospels tell us of Pilate's unease with the charges brought before him on Jesus.

Jesus is no real threat to Pilate, but his popularity is beginning to eclipse the Temple establishment's hold on the people. So they enlist Pilate to get rid of Jesus, and Pilate, not really *wanting* to get rid of Jesus, but needing to maintain control over the situation in Jerusalem at the height of its Passover fervor, found out that Jesus was from Herod's territory, and that Herod just happened to be in Jerusalem at the time. So he tried to palm the problem off on Herod.

Herod, curious but not committed (again!), was familiar with the activities of Jesus and wanted to know more, perhaps get him to do a trick or two. I think that's about the tenor of Herod's interest in Jesus and John, both.

When Jesus didn't respond, he sent him back to Pilate, dressing him up in an elegant robe of mockery, and Pilate took it from there.

Both Pilate and Herod allow themselves to be distracted from the glimpse they have of the reign of God, when in the words of the Psalmist,

¹⁰ Love and faithfulness come together;
justice and peace embrace.

¹¹ Faithfulness appears from earth
and justice looks down from heaven.ⁱⁱ

Both surrender to their fear of what others think, of what others might do. Both silence that inner voice, that tells them that they are opposing the will of God and hindering the spread of God's way of love and truth, of justice and peace.

Like Pilate and Herod, we can find ourselves torn between truth and self-interest, drawn to the message of repentance, forgiveness, and the immanent inbreaking of the kingdom of God into our world, yet reluctant to stand up to the intimidating forces of peer pressure, and of empire, that erode our resolve to welcome and proclaim the reign of God, and to participate in it. We allow our various worldly roles to define our discipleship, when we need to surrender all those other roles, and then take them back as gift of God and call to ministry, subject to the claims of stewardship, under the guidance and in the power of the Holy Spirit. We latch onto the resources of the Creation in pursuit of more, more, and still more, never reminding ourselves either that "the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof," as the 24th Psalm asserts, or that "we do not inherit the earth from our parents, we borrow it from our children," as declared in a popular

quotation of now-uncertain origin, attributed to everybody from Chief Seattle to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

In Baptism we promised to stand firm against the cosmic, social and personal influences that distract us from following the Messiah into the various contexts of our lives. Sealed in Christ with the promised Holy Spirit to name and unmask and engage those powers, to guide us into all the wisdom and insight of God, and to empower us to do the work God has given us to do, we go forth into the world focused on our discipleship, as we spread the Word, bind up the wounds, and embody the reign of God in our lives and in our fellowship.

ⁱ Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: the Bible in contemporary language* (1 Sa 8:1,3–22). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

ⁱⁱ *The Revised English Bible*. (1996). (Ps 85:10–11). Cambridge; New York; Melbourne; Madrid; Cape Town; Singapore; São Paulo; Delhi; Dubai; Tokyo: Cambridge University Press. Tenses slightly altered for context.