



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau
July 8, 2018
Push-Back on Jesus (Hope Restored Series)
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Let's stand for the reading of God's word. We will be hearing from The Bible Experience, Today's New International Version. Again, it is a preview of what we often listen to in our Just Show Up Life Training Class.

Mark 6:17 For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married.

Mark 6:18 For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

Mark 6:19 So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to,

Mark 6:20 because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

Mark 6:21 Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.

Mark 6:22 When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you."

Mark 6:23 And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

Mark 6:24 She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" "The head of John the Baptist," she answered.

Mark 6:25 At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: "I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

Mark 6:26 The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her.

Mark 6:27 So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison,

Mark 6:28 and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother.

Mark 6:29 On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

This is not really a story of John the Baptist. It may seem so. Yes, I know he loses his head. Poor guy. But he's a hero of the faith and he goes to heaven. No, the scary thing is that it's a story about us – a warning not to be like one of the three other people in the story: King Herod, his wife Herodias, and their daughter Salomé

Because as we will see if we become like them, we in essence push back on Jesus and don't allow Him to be the Lord of our Life, or not to be our best friend.

So, let's take a look at this historical story. I thank Tim Keller for helping me understand this passage with his thoughts in this sermon. Herod's wife Herodias is power-hungry. She's a schemer and has no heart for the gospel. Daughter Salomé listens to her mom even when it is the wrong thing to do. She has no heart for the gospel either. But for this sermon I am going to drill down on King Herod Antipas.

First of all, who is this King Herod? There are many King Herods, and they are all Roman. This is one is not his father Herod the Great, nor his brother Herod Archelaus, nor Herod II, his half brother. In this Gospel reading it's Herod Antipas.

Antipas divorced his wife Phasaelis to marry Herodias. For the Jewish community this was a big no-no because Herodias was not only his half-brother's wife, but she was also Antipas' niece, which then makes this incest.

So, John the Baptizer, the cousin and baptizer of Jesus, John who confirmed that Jesus is the Lamb of God, the Messiah and who went about preaching the Gospel, this godly John spoke out against Herod Antipas. Not liking criticism, Herod put John in prison. No one criticizes the King Herod after all, especially when it had to do with his personal life. Now here is where it gets interesting.

Mark 6:20 “for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.”

Let’s study at that verse for a while. Herod Antipas is a pretty mixed up guy. His whole family, all the Herods, were power hungry. They had the power to put away anyone who might disagree with them, as Antipas did with John. So, on one hand, Antipas feared John. But on the other hand, he liked listening to him. John was popular with many of the Jews. John had clout with them. John had the power that came from his speaking the truth of God’s kingdom. So not wanting to get into political trouble, Herod protected John.

And yet something else was happening. More than political reasons, Herod saw John as holy and righteous. He knew John was a good man, a devout man.

When it says in our verse that Herod “liked” to listen to John, “like” is a very strong word in the original Greek language of the Bible. It’s not like, “oh, I like or prefer ice cream.” No, He GREATLY desired John’s wisdom. Translated literally it’s like John’s teaching brought him happiness based on sweet pleasure. (Gee, maybe that is like ice cream). Herod liked John’s teaching a lot. He couldn’t wait to hear John.

Now think about this. How did Herod get to hear John’s teaching and like it? Scholars think that at times, Herod would bring John out of prison so that John could talk to him! Is this incredible or what? Herod puts John in prison because he was saying things about his marriage that he didn’t like. But he would let him out at times for him to denounce him again and speak about the kingdom of God that Jesus was bringing.

There was something about John that Herod knew deep down inside was true. Think of this. John the Baptizer is maybe the only person in the kingdom who talked straight to Herod. John could

honestly tell Herod to his face that he is a sinner; that he shouldn’t be marrying his niece; that he needs to get with God. He needed a relationship with God, not human power, for that is the real future. John could tell him that there is a Messiah named Jesus who exists RIGHT NOW in his contemporary time and in his land. Follow Him. Believe in Him.

But our passage also says that Herod was greatly puzzled. Again, if we look at the original Greek the word used for “puzzled” is *aporeo*. It was used to mean you get on a road to start on a journey and then you come to a fork in the road not knowing if you should go to the left or to the right. More than how we use the word puzzled, *aporeo* means you are PARALYZED with indecision.

For some, the word means you want to get on the road but you are even afraid of the road. That’s a dilemma! More than just puzzled, you are paralyzed, scared, frozen. So, Herod “Aporeo” Antipas is of a double mind about John. On one hand, Herod likes listening to John. He knows John is holy. He knows he is righteous. But he is scared of him. So he puts him in prison only to bring him out of prison at times.

Double minded. Do I believe John or not? But if I believe John and follow this Jesus he talks about, then I have to change my life from the life I like to then lead to a life of following Jesus.

Friends, that where we all are. Someone in our life like John has told us about Jesus and the life we could live if we follow Him. It’s not an easy life, but it’s the right life, the most fulfilling life to live. It’s an abundant life, but it’s also a sacrificial life. We will have to give up things.

Herod will have to admit he should not have married his niece. Perhaps his sexual appetite was so great he didn’t care about Jewish Law. He didn’t care if he married his niece because he was attracted to her. And his sexual appetite might have been what made him

succumb to Salomé, Herodias’ daughter, to give her anything she wanted because of a dance she performed in front of him. And when she said give me the head of John on a platter, he did what he promised publicly because he didn’t want to lose face with a public vow of giving her anything she wanted.

So now, let’s bring it all home to us. I think all of us have a little Herod Antipas in us, and so I want to teach today to give us some antibodies against the Antipas that might be reigning in our hearts. I guess you could say that the first course of the sermon was the Antipasto! On a platter!

Back to our story. John the Baptizer presents the gospel of Jesus to Herod, who pushes back on it. At times WE are double minded, like Antipas. Maybe there is a part of us that says, “I like hearing about Jesus. I respect Jesus. I know He is holy and righteous. I know He is the Messiah. I love the gospel teaching. I go to conferences and seminars and Bible studies about Him, but I am living a puzzled life. I fear getting on the road that might lead me to crossroads of where I have to take Jesus’ way instead of my way.

“There are many roads, many ways, and the gospel tells me to be generous. But I like being stingy and spending it on me instead of the gospel. The gospel tells me to be kind and loving to strangers and immigrants, but I like just taking care of my own. The gospel tells me to be kind to all people of all orientation – politically, sexually, economically – people of all strata and persuasion, but I like just hanging out with my own type.

The gospel tells me to go all-in for Jesus, but I am afraid if I do that. I get a little *aporeo*, scared, frozen, paralyzed that I might have to change major parts of my life. I might have to change some of my habits in order to help the poor, the environment, to be kind to people and to animals. I’m not sure if I want to do that.”

So I like Jesus but I decide to push back on Him and His gospel. I decide to behead the Gospel, cut it down so that I only follow the parts I like and then I put God's word in a prison, where at times I let it out, and hear a little bit, but then lock it up again.

I am fearful of getting on the road to Truth, even though I know Jesus says, "I am The Way, The Truth, and The Life, and no comes to the Father God except through Me." John 14:6

I don't want to fully follow the gospel of Jesus. I just want Jesus to bless me with what I want, rather than do what He wants or commands.

July 4th is when we celebrated overthrowing the rule of a British King over our country. But July 4th should not mean we overthrow the King Jesus, the real king of kings, so that we can have freedom and liberty apart from Jesus. Actually to be a Christian is not a day of Independence, but a day of dependence on the true King and our allegiance to follow Him.

The thing is we don't want to follow Jesus all the time. At times we want to lock Him up in a prison. What do you mean give up on that boyfriend? What do you mean I may have to be single for the rest of my life? What do you mean I have to forgive that person and reconcile? What do you mean I need to be more generous? What do you mean I have to leave that job? What do you mean I have to take that job? What do you mean I have to come out of retirement to volunteer or work at that job?

Challenge question: Do we push back on Jesus? Do we lock Him up and then let Him out a little bit every now and then to hear words of comfort and then lock him up again? I would say Herod Antipas, for one, allowed himself to be led by his thirst for independence and his sexual passions rather than to do what is right and holy.

Having worked with singles for many years in ministry, I know that the challenge for them is this: yes, I know I want to follow Jesus except for the areas of sexuality. And for that – I'm sorry I will have sex outside of marriage, so Jesus I am going to put you in prison on that issue.

Fill in the blank. Maybe it's not sex but maybe it's drugs or porn or it can even be the quest for success or making everything about the family or the checkbook, and not about the Gospel. My calendar is about me and not the kingdom. And on those issues, Jesus, I'm going to push you back and put You in prison for a while.

The question is: what is the source of our self-esteem? Really. Career? Our family? Our money? Our stock portfolio? Our popularity? Our grades? Our peer group? What trophies are the bases of our self-esteem? What is the mark of success?

When John talks to Herod, Herod realizes that John is not some greasy, slippery salesman because John gets NOTHING out of telling the truth of Jesus and the lifestyle He wants us to live. If John keeps talking about the gospel, he will GET HIS HEAD CUT OFF, but he keeps talking about it anyway. It is indeed a challenging gospel.

Jesus' criteria might be different than ours. You have heard me read several times from the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 25 of how Jesus asks if we REALLY have His heart. If we do, we will have actually done something for the poor, the widow, the prisoner, and the stranger to our country. He says if you haven't, you go to hell. Whoa, that's harsh. His words not mine.

But it does get easier because Jesus says I send you my Holy Spirit to empower you to do such things. I empower you to follow Me and to love the unlovable. God offers the fruit of the Holy Spirit – which is love, joy peace, patience,

kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

So, if you were to look at your life from, let's say, a year ago to now, have you grown in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? If not, maybe we have been locking up Jesus, pushing Him out of our life because like fruit on a tree, it should be natural that fruit grows. Mangoes come from mango trees; lemons come from lemon trees. They don't work on it. Fruit just happens naturally.

Let me add to clarify. Jesus would say it is not works that get you into heaven; it's grace. What gets you into heaven really is a relationship with Him that He is offering to us, but we have to accept it and run with it with Him. He wants to adopt us. He offers us His friendship.

When Herod hears John talk about Jesus, he needs to accept it and run with it. The true marks of a relationship with Him is not church attendance but love, joy peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control that you pass on to others, specifically the poor, the widows, the strangers to our land, and the prisoners. Why them? Because, hear this, they all have no ability to pay you back. We do it because it's the right thing to do and God told us to. That's pretty straight.

Whatever we do in life, whatever accomplishment we have done, we have got to "look two songs down." What do I mean by that?

Last Sunday Joe Bright, our intern/worship leader for 11:11, said an interesting thing during our *Deeper* seminar on worship. He said that when he leads worship, he tries to be open to where the Holy Spirit wants to take Him and the songs in worship. Joe has a spontaneous style of worship leadership. He listens to the Holy Spirit for direction on whether to change songs during a service or maybe at least how a song is sung.

He was taught by Tim Hughes, a worship leader, that if you are leading the opening song, think about two songs later where God might want to take the congregation. Maybe that song will be what you planned or maybe it will be a different song.

When you get to the second song, think about the fourth song. When you get to the third song, think about the fifth song. Where is the Lord taking you? It was a great metaphor for me.

When we have accomplished something, ask God, “What do you want me to do with that two projects down the road? What are you leading me to do?” Projects or events in our lives are not stand-alones. Where is God taking you with that? Your company hits financial goals, what is God wanting you to do with that?

You did well in stocks? You got a good performance review? You got a good grade? You won a trophy in sports? You have a good marriage? You accomplished a huge training event? Does it end right there? What is God saying you are to do with that down the road?

Is it a springboard to reach more people for Jesus? Is it an open door to talk about Jesus? Is it a way to help someone in pain? You just sang a great song. What is the song you will sing two songs down the road? You just had a good chapter in your life. What are two chapters down the road going to be like?

Herod was puzzled. What am I do to with this John and the gospel he is preaching about Jesus? Right at that moment, a crack in the door about Jesus may have been opening for Herod. He keeps bringing out John to talk to him. He likes to listen to him. He respects John and knows he is righteous and holy even though he is condemning his lifestyle.

But as he listens to John, he knows he will have to give up something in his life, like we all do, to follow Jesus – some prejudice, some practice, some busyness

(oh, now I’m meddling), or some belief in order to follow Jesus. Herod is puzzled. What to do? He is a double-minded man. He is on the road but he is at a crossroads. Which way is Herod going to go?

And so here is where the great theology book comes in – *The Lord of the Rings*, one of my favorite stories made into one of the all-time greatest movies. One of the Seven Wonders of the World, as far as I am concerned. In the book the *Lord of the Rings* (as I’m informed by Tim Keller) there is one scene where the author JRR Tolkien admits that he himself weeps, yes, weeps, when he re-reads his own book.

What scene could that possibly be? Here it is: the scene of Gollum leading Frodo and Sam toward a monster spider.

The character Gollum is leading Sam and Frodo, the heroes of the story, into the lair of a huge horrible monster spider named Shelob. They don’t know they are going right into a trap of suffering and death. But before that, Gollum is double minded. He wrestles inside of himself if whether he should do good or evil. Help them escape or put them in death’s door.

When Gollum does evil, his eyes turn green, but at that moment there is no green in his eyes yet. Like Herod, Gollum is trying to think of what to do: kill them or free them? Kill them or free them? For a moment, Gollum was going to do the right thing, but then his eyes grow green and that one fleeting moment of doing good disappears. His life changes towards evil from then on, and puts the Hobbits in danger of the giant spider.

And this is the passage that Tolkien the author says he couldn’t read without weeping. Gollum was so close, but then he chooses to move away from the truth and goodness.

Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher and theologian from the 1800’s, says that sin is building your identity on

anything other than God – money, self-esteem, family, marriage, success, fame, popularity, approval, revenge, and unforgiveness. You won’t have the human power to combat those. The green eyes will come back if you try to do it with just human strength. We can only overcome them through the power of the Holy Spirit and through the person of Jesus Christ – the same one that John talked about 2,000 years ago to Herod Antipas. Jesus is our only hope.

We need supernatural power from God to follow God. Psychological power or modeling your life after someone is not effective or life lasting. Tim Keller points out astutely that even if you say my strength comes from some moral hero like Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, people who gave it all for justice, or maybe someone who is not a religious person, someone who you say, “I want to be like him or her” – eventually if you model your life after that person, you will find it’s a dead end. It’s a no-go. If Herod says, “I want to be like John who has the guts and courage to stand up me,” that’s not good enough.

John was different. He would never say, “Be like me!” He was a hero who never pointed to himself. Fake heroes like Wonder Woman or Iron Man point to themselves as rescuers or saviors. But a real hero like John pointed to someone beyond himself. He always pointed to Jesus, who was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He pointed us to Jesus who, with the Holy Spirit, gives us the real power to be courageous heroes as I believe in the case of Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and I would throw in others like Martin Luther King Jr., William Wilberforce, and others.

When John talked of Jesus, John said, “HE must increase, but I must decrease.” It’s all about Jesus. John would have worn a t-shirt that would proclaim He is Greater than I!

Don't be like Herod who, for a season, had the truth of Jesus right in his grasp. But he couldn't make the leap from just hearing about Jesus and hearing it often, to truly integrating the Holy Spirit and the life of Jesus in him.

You know what is tragic? When we see Herod at the end of the gospels, he is not talking to John anymore (who is now dead). He now has Jesus right in his throne room! But at that point, tragically, the die is cast. Herod made his choice. His eyes are Gollum-green!

He is no longer open to spiritual things that John talked about. The door has been slammed shut. The Messiah is right in his midst, and what does Herod do?

Again, in the Gospel of Luke chapter 23 it says Herod had wanted to meet Jesus for a long time because he had heard so much about him. But again, this double-mindedness, this Gollum-greenness came into him. For what did Herod do in the end? He treated Jesus with contempt. He and his soldiers mock Jesus. First John, now Jesus. The answer for Herod's life is right there in front of him, but like Gollum, if he had moments of indecision, they are long gone. He has no openness to hear the gospel. And Jesus decides to say nothing to him. In the end of his career Herod is banished to go live in Gaul, as he continued to live his power-hungry life and failed. Herod dies with his wife in exile!

To live a life without Jesus in us, empowering us means a life of exile. So our challenge today is – are we beheading things Jesus wants us to do? We can choose today to open up the cell where we may have put Jesus in and say, "Truly be my Lord. And say, I'll do whatever. I know it doesn't mean life will be easy but today I want to begin to bring down a barrier that I have put up. Maybe it's a door I have shut to distance myself from God. And today I want to stand and release that. Maybe it is a doubt or a fear, a worry, or some issue that I know is blocking Jesus from me."

Maybe to be honest there was an issue some of you came with that even made it hard to worship, hard to sing, or hard to pray. For others it may be a habit, maybe a prejudice, maybe an addiction that we need help on, or apathy. And now Jesus is saying, "Let me handle that. Trust Me."

Let's pray about those things now. I'm going to ask if there is an issue you want to bring before the Lord that maybe you have not given over to Him to please stand right now. Whatever that worry or hurt may be, please stand and I am going to ask people near you to pray for you. They don't need to say anything out loud. Just to pray for you and let the Holy Spirit work His tender healing and care for you.