



**"Gagging God"**  
**Rev. Dr. Scott Field**  
**Mark 6: 14-29**  
**July 15, 2018**  
**9:15 AM Service**

*<sup>14</sup> King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."*

*<sup>15</sup> Others said, "He is Elijah."*

*And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago."*

*<sup>16</sup> But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!"*

*<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." <sup>19</sup> So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, <sup>20</sup> 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.*

*<sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> 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." <sup>23</sup> And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."*

*<sup>24</sup> She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?"*

*"The head of John the Baptist," she answered.*

*<sup>25</sup> 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."*

*<sup>26</sup> The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. <sup>27</sup> So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, <sup>28</sup> and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. <sup>29</sup> On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.*

This is a long, detailed, and gripping account of the folly of King Herod, the conniving vengefulness of Herodias, the seemingly crushing defeat of the Word of God brought by John the Baptist. You could make a Hollywood blockbuster out of this sort of event, couldn't you?

It is, actually, however, a flashback, some back story, if you will, to the mission Jesus had given to his followers: to preach the gospel, to cast out demons, and to heal the sick. This isn't the main storyline of Mark's gospel, but an important insight through the lens of what looks, at first encounter, to be a stunning loss for the Kingdom of God.

If you were here last week in worship, you may remember Tyler Hughes' observation that this gospel, this amazing good news of God's redemption through Jesus Christ, this power of God for the salvation of all who believe, this precious gift was given to *ordinary* people -- like fishermen and tax collectors and businesswomen and you and me. Ordinary people. But since God doesn't determine our value by our social position or economic strength or political power, God brings this message to the *extraordinary* people as well. The up and in as well as the down and out. In this case, the King, his family, and his inner circle.

Apparently, the mission is getting noticed not just among the crowds seeking to be near Jesus himself, but also in the upper social reaches of the region. The up and in people, the ones who wielded the power and controlled the conventional wisdom, were asking, "Where does this guy get the power to do the things he is doing?" Herod himself, I think, had a personal apprehension that he knew exactly where this power of Jesus came from --- and was deeply fearful of what it meant.

Some concluded that Jesus was something like an Old Testament prophet bringing signs of God's power and judgment. Others, that Jesus was Elijah, the particular Old Testament prophet who confronted the corruption of Jewish hierarchy. But many, apparently, claimed it was John the Baptist raised from the dead. And that is where Herod's guilty conscience kicked in, "I had John the Baptist beheaded, but yes, he's been raised from the dead and is the power behind this Jesus!"

We then come to a flashback of what happened between Herod and John the Baptist. One of our problems with all of this is that it's easy to get confused which Herod we are talking about. It's a little like professional boxer George Foreman. He has twelve children, seven daughters and five sons. But all five sons have the same name: George Edward Foreman. Easy to get confused.

There are actually six rulers named "Herod" in the New Testament. There is Herod the Great (ruled 37 - 4 B.C.). He is the Herod of the Christmas accounts who tricked the Magi/Wise Men and ordered the male infants, two years old and under, executed in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill the rival King of the Jews (aka Jesus) who had been born there. The Herod we're focused on today is one of his sons, Herod Antipas. He wasn't technically a king, which apparently irked his wife -- at least his second wife -- because, well, because you'd much rather introduce yourself as the wife of the King rather than the Roman government technical term of a Tetrarch. It just doesn't have that classy ring to it, does it? "Glad to meet you. I'm Herodias, wife of the Tetrarch." It really meant that Antipas was the ruler over a *quarter* of his father's kingdom, just 25%; which mean he wasn't considered quite the ruler his father was and Rome specifically denied him the actual title of "King". Mark's Gospel seems to use it as something of a mockery to him.

The opinions about Jesus among the political chatter class were that Jesus was like an Old Testament prophet demonstrating the power and judgement of God. Some specifically thought he was like Elijah, the Sequel. Elijah was a particular prophet of the ninth century B.C. who, notably, went up against King Ahab and Queen Jezebel of Israel because of their religious pluralism. You can read more about this in the Bible: 1 Kings 17-19.

But many had hunch it was a much more contemporary situation than a dusty old prophet of the Old Testament. It was John the Baptist raised from the dead. And this struck some fearful anxiety into Herod Antipas because he himself had ordered the execution of John the Baptizer.

John the Baptizer had publicly called out Herod Antipas as immoral and corrupt. He called for repentance because the Kingdom of God was on the horizon and it was time to begin living according to God's Way. What was the problem with Antipas? Why did John the Baptizer single him out?

Maybe you can follow me here -- if not, no worries -- I'll return to the regularly scheduled sermon in a moment.

Herod Antipas was married to the daughter of King Aretas. Aretas was king of the Nabateans, a tribal people who lived on the eastern boundary of Israel, and whose capital city was a place you may have heard about named Petra. But, as the first century historian Josephus gives the account, when Antipas was visiting with his half-brother Philip (who also ruled a portion of their father's kingdom), he became enchanted with his half-brother's wife. Her name was Herodias (there's that Herod name again!). What ensued was that Antipas divorced his wife and Herodias, who was apparently quite the social climber and schemer, divorced her husband Philip because she thought she thought Jerusalem would be better than the hinterlands east of Galilee. So Antipas married his half-brother's wife. But, as it turns out, there is actually more to the story. Herodias was actually the daughter of another one of the Herod half-brothers. So, Antipas divorced his first wife (which eventually led to a major military battle between Israel and the Nabateans) and married his half-niece. This marriage outrages the Jewish population not only because of the divorce, but because they viewed marrying his niece as incestuous (see Leviticus 18:18 and 20:21)

Herodias, the second wife, the half-niece, of Antipas was furious over the public humiliation and accusation made by John the Baptist. Antipas himself, however, apparently liked to hear John's thundering preaching. The Scripture tells us that Herod arrested and imprisoned John in part to protect him from his own wife's plans to have John the Baptizer killed (Mark 6:18-20).

Remember, though, that Herodias was a schemer. She waited for an opportunity. And, as it turns out, her husband's birthday bash provided exactly what she was hoping for. The guests were all "A List" people: government officials, military commanders, and important people of the area. It is a wild, extravagant, drunken stag party. And part of the entertainment for the evening, the highlight it seems, is when Herodias' daughter, the step-daughter of Antipas, captivates him with her presumably erotic dancing. His inflamed passion, which hints at his incestuous lust, overwhelms him. Clearly her dancing is a show-stopper for the crowd of drunken revelers. Antipas, never one to hold back from a moment for the grand gesture, made this promise to her in front of all of her guests: "Whatever you ask of me, I will give you – up to half of my kingdom!" (This is laughable since he is actually the ruler of just a quarter of the kingdom of his father – it is clearly a grand overpromise).

The step-daughter didn't really know what to ask for. So she left the party briefly to consult with her mother – for the women were not allowed in the party hall with the men. And her mother seized the opportunity: "Bring me the head of John the Baptizer on a platter." Antipas had a moment of sober distress, but, as the Scripture tells us, because of his oath and because he didn't want to be embarrassed in front of his guests, he immediately sent an executioner to put John to death. And so the prophet of God, the one who confronted the ruling class with their immorality and corruption, was crushed by the vengeance of Herodias.

### **Happy Birthday, Herod?**

This biblical account of Herod's birthday party has sparked artwork, plays, and opera. It is dramatic, ironic, and tragic.

It is also immediately practical, for it contains at least two warnings as well as a testimony of invincible hope.

The first warning to us comes in the person of Herod Antipas.

He, like many, is intrigued by the preaching of the gospel. He found it to be some form of entertainment or something that engaged his mind or senses in some way. The Scripture tells us that Herod Antipas was intrigued by the preaching of John the Baptizer. You may have that experience, too. You listen to sermons, play Christian music; maybe go to a rally or event when this band or that one is coming through Chicago. You might go to see this or that Christian movie. Apparently, Herod could listen to sermons all day long, but like so many, he had a rock-hard resistance to repentance and was too weak, too worried about the opinion of others, to actually obey. He took an oath in front of his guests at the party and was too weak to stand for what was clearly right. So, Herod ends up saving face but losing his soul.

And the second, as we might expect, comes from Herodias. She worries that the message of God's Word to her requires a change in her ambitions and her behavior. She will do whatever she can to undermine the word of God in her husband's life. She is concerned about her social position and public persona; Herodias will do anything, including the exploiting her own daughter, in order to get the life that she believes is owed to her.

By his pathetic caving in to social pressure, Herod Antipas thought he would silence the word of God. By her use of privilege and power, Herodias was fully convinced that she had defeated the Word of God.

When you get to the sorrowful ending of this flashback in Mark's gospel, you would probably conclude that Antipas and Herodias had indeed crushed the emerging Kingdom of God announced by John the Baptizer. "...John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb" (Mark 6:29).

Some of us may understand these two options all too well. We are afraid to let anybody know we are followers of Jesus, we won't say a word about Him to others, because we don't want to risk their disapproval. At the cost of saving face, of being accepted by others who have no use for God in the first place, we run the risk of losing our soul. And others of us may marshal whatever we can to comfort ourselves with the assurance that all of this God-talk, this call to repentance and re-aligning our lives with God's Word, God's Way, and God's people, all of this is no match for our intelligence, our financial strength, our street smarts, and our clever side-stepping of our personal need for salvation.

What was so threatening to Herod and to Herodias?

Simply this: If God is King, then Herod is not. If Jesus is Lord, then you are not. I am not.

Did Antipas and Herodias succeed in gagging God?

Today you can visit the archaeological excavations of Machaerus, the southeastern fortress and palace of Herod. It is the place Josephus, first century Jewish historian, tells us that Herod held his birthday party and where Salome danced her deadly dance. It is a bunch of dust and stones.

In contrast, the followers of Jesus number over 3 billion today.

Governments and authorities have always attempted to crush the advance of the Kingdom of God, tried to contain it, institutionalize it, and control it. Herod could not. The persecution of the Roman Emperors could not. The battles within the church, east and west, have not. Whether it was atheistic communism, racist National Socialism, or rampant secularism, the Word of God prevails.

This account of Herod's birthday party, I said, was a flashback. The larger story goes like this: Jesus had sent out his followers to preach, to cast out demons, and to heal. They had amazing success. The flashback concerning the death of John the Baptizer only foreshadowed the coming arrest, torture and death of Jesus himself. The Kingdom of God does not advance without opposition. Strong, entrenched, persistent opposition. It is an opposition that runs through individual human hearts as well as

movements, institutions, and governments. So, we should not be surprised when it looks to us as if all the forces of culture are arrayed against the gospel.

Jesus was very clear about this:

“In the world you will have trouble but take heart for I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

### **Stand Up for Jesus**

When that voice whispers within you to be quiet about Jesus because others might disapprove, stand up for Jesus.

When you find yourself strangely attracted to the Savior even though at a previous time you may have dismissed Him or set him aside or determined that he was not worth your consideration, stand up for Jesus.

When family members tell you not to get too deep into your religion because you have more important things to be concerned with, more important ambitions to fulfill, stand up for Jesus.

When friends dissuade you, tempt you, insult you or pour on the sarcasm, stand up for Jesus.

When you see an injustice that needs to be set right, when you see an oppression that needs to be lifted, when the voiceless have no one to speak for them, stand up for Jesus.

When fear and anxiety threaten to silence your voice, steal your joy, snatch away your faith, and stifle your love, stand up for Jesus.

Though your faith may be small, you serve a great God.

Though you may be weak, you can do all things through Christ who gives you the strength.

God has not anointed us, commissioned us, and gifted us to be timid, fearful and weak but has given us power and love.

This is not easy. But what value will it be if we seek to gain all that the world has to offer, but lose our soul along the way? Sisters and brothers, stand up for Jesus.

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For Those Interested, Here Are Thumbnail Sketches of the Six Herod's in the New Testament from Ken Berding of Talbot School of Theology:

1. **Herod the Great (ruled 37-4 B.C.)** He's the guy in the Christmas story. Super powerful client king answerable to Rome. Tried to trick the wise men. Killed the babies in Bethlehem (not to mention some of his own sons and wives). Not cuddly at all. Actually, you wouldn't invite any of these Herods to become your "bosom friend," but especially not "the Great."
2. **Herod Archelaus (ruled 4 B.C.-A.D. 6)** He was one of Herod the Great's three sons mentioned in the Bible. He received one-half of his father's territory, the area surrounding and near Jerusalem (Judea and Samaria). Joseph was unwilling to move Mary and toddler Jesus to Bethlehem after fleeing to Egypt because Bethlehem was in this Herod's territory and, like his father "the Great," Herod Archelaus wasn't known to be very cuddly either. He got replaced by a Roman procurator less than ten years into his reign; that's why Pontius Pilate is the man in charge at Jesus' crucifixion rather than one of the "Herods."

3. **Herod Antipas (ruled 4 B.C.-A.D. 39)** Jesus called him "the Fox" (Luke 13:32). Received a quarter of his father's territory (Galilee and Perea). Divorced his first wife and married Herodias, the wife of his brother (who was yet a different "Herod"). Killed John the Baptist. Pontius Pilate sent Jesus to see this Herod as part of Jesus' trial since this Herod was visiting Jerusalem at the time Jesus was sentenced to death. Did you know that Pilate and Herod Antipas became friends that day (Luke 23:12)?
4. **Herod Philip the Tetrarch (ruled 4 B.C.-A.D. 34)** Got the remaining quarter of his father's territory (north and east of Galilee—mostly ruled over Syrians and Greeks). Married his niece, Salome, the daughter of Herodias (Herod Antipas's wife-of-sin).
5. **Herod Agrippa I (ruled A.D. 37-44 [41-44 in Judea])** Grandson of Herod the Great and nephew of Herodias, Herod Antipas's wife. Eventually ended up ruling over even more territory than did his grandfather, Herod the Great. In the book of Acts he is known as the one who put Peter in prison (Acts 12:1-5) ... although he couldn't *keep* him there (12:6-19)! Also ... "He did not give God the glory" when referred to as a god by the people of Tyre and Sidon and was thus struck by an angel and "eaten by worms" (Acts 12:20-23). Yes...I know...TMI...but it's an easy way to remember which "Herod" he is.
6. **Herod Agrippa II (ruled A.D. 50s until long after the end of the Jewish war; died around A.D. 93)** Like his father Herod Agrippa I and great-grandfather Herod the Great he ruled over a large territory. He's the one who interviewed Paul along with the Roman procurator Porcius Festus when Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea (in Palestine) after Paul's third missionary journey (Acts 25-26). Agrippa exclaimed to Paul (literal translation): "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian" (Acts 26:28). Or was his statement ironic? Either way, Paul ended up appealing directly to Caesar and so had no more contact after this with the final powerful "Herod."  
<https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2014/how-many-herods-are-there-in-the-bible>