

February 26-March 1, 2024 Edition

Following The Year^(s) Of Jesus Part 113

Jesus, John The Baptist & Herod

-or-

Have You Heard The Tragedy Of King Herod The Fool?

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;o) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we're going to look at a story in which Jesus figures in but Jesus isn't really in the story- we're going to look at the death of Jesus' cousin John The Baptizer. Now we've discussed this before but there's a reason I like to use John The Baptizer rather than John The Baptist. When we call him the Baptist it's a short jump to thinking that John must have started the Baptist denomination but that's not the case. Jesus didn't have other cousins named Ralph the Methodist or Bubba the Episcopalian. John was called the Baptizer because one of his main roles was to baptize the people of Israel in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. So far in our chronological timeline of Jesus' life we've met John at Jesus' baptism and we know he was arrested by Herod but in Mark chapter six we find out John's fate:

Herod Antipas, the king, soon heard about Jesus, because everyone was talking about him. Some were saying, "This must be John the Baptist raised from the dead. That is why he can do such miracles..." When Herod heard about Jesus, he said, "John, the man I beheaded, has come back from the dead." Mark 6:14-16 (NLT)

Now most of us pretty much know the story so we're not shocked when we read that John was beheaded by Herod. But if you were one of the early readers of the gospel of Mark (written initially for the Romans) then I imagine you would be shocked by Mark's dropping this bombshell on you- the gentle reader. It's a very strange choice stylistically but here we are so let's just notice and move on to who this Herod guy is.

Very early on in The Years Of Following Jesus lesson series (probably about 2 years ago ;o) we met Herod the Great- the guy who tried to kill the baby Jesus. Herod Antipas is that Herod's son. This has nothing to do with our subject for today but when we were in Bible college Judy liked to use memory devices to recall things. For Herod Antipas she decided the way she'd remember him was by calling him Herod Fancypants. I told her that sounded like a cat and she told me to mind my own business (we were not dating at the time but were study partners so I let it slide). This is the Herod who killed John and at the end of His life Jesus will finally meet Herod Antipas during His trial.

But it's Herod's relationship with John The Baptizer that we are going to be looking at this week and how this story is possibly the saddest story in the gospels (with the exception of Herod's dad killing all those babies in Bethlehem 30 years before). But it's not a sad story for John- in fact it's John's final triumph. I know it's hard for us to see it that way but the Bible presents a very different definition of death than we generally have. From the Bible's perspective death is just an upgrade. John wasn't afraid of death (at least he didn't let his fear stop him from speaking out) so I really have a tough time thinking of this story as a sad story for him. No, this story is sad because of what we see transpiring in Herod's heart.

I don't know if you ever saw the Star Wars prequels (they weren't nearly as good as the original trilogy but I liked them ok) but there's a scene that takes place between Senator Palpatine and Anakin Skywalker where Palpatine asks Anakin, "have you heard of the tragedy of Darth Plagueis?" The only reason I bring that up is that I think this story we're looking at this week is Mark asking us, "have you heard of the tragedy of Herod Antipas the fool?" Because this story tells the heartbreaking story of a brutal man (what chance did he really have with a dad like Herod the Great?) who was on the precipice of choosing

a new direction for his life but in the end, didn't. This story is Mark telling each of us, don't let this happen to you. Because it can. It can happen to any of us. We'll look at exactly why I believe that as we go through the rest of the week but for today maybe spend some time reflecting on any new directions for your own life that you might feel God nudging you towards and what might happen if you choose to ignore God's gentle push.

Tuesday Reflection: So this week we're looking to one of the most evil people in the gospels to teach us a very important lesson- a guy named Herod Antipas. How can we learn anything from someone as evil as Herod Antipas? Well, psychologists talk about people who can serve as "models" for us to learn from. There's the mastery model which is someone who does what we are trying to learn masterfully (in the gospels only Jesus fits this model). Then you've got what they call the coping model- someone who is doing pretty well at whatever you are trying to learn but they haven't reached mastery level yet (the apostles might be good coping models in the gospels). But there's a third model- the warning model. When we were in psychology class together back in college when Judy was trying to explain the different models to me she said, "and then there's the warning model- that would be you, Ed!" I wanted to argue with her but I realized she knew me better than I would like to admit.

So Herod would be the third model- the warning model. In this story we learn what not-to-do from Antipas. Herod Antipas was a colonial king for Rome and if you know anything about how Rome dealt with their client kings then watching how Antipas deals with his subjects is another warning model. Client kings for Rome were to keep the tax money flowing to the Roman treasury while keeping the peace in his kingdom. To do that most client kings tried to make sure that they never did anything that would so alienate their subjects that a revolution would take place. Herod Antipas marries his brother, Herod Philip's, wife. Just in case it's not disturbing enough for anyone to marry his sister in law this makes it MUCH worse- Herodias was also Antipas' niece. Can you say, ewwwww? John The Baptizer hears about it and calls Antipas out. Herodias wants Antipas to kill John but he won't do that so he arrests John instead and Mark tells us this:

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 6:20 (NIV)

In other words while Herod Antipas has John The Baptizer locked up at his fortress in Machaerus which was across the Dead Sea from Masada. For some reason Herod Antipas would have John The Baptizer brought out so he could listen to him preach. And I imagine John's sermons to Antipas were always and only about one subject- his marriage to his niece/sister in law. But for some reason Herod kept being drawn to John even though John's sermons were personal attacks on Antipas' lifestyle. Why?

Because Herod "feared" John. That doesn't mean that John made Herod shake in his boots. Herod wasn't afraid of John at least not the way we'd define fear. Other translations of this same verse say that Herod was in awe of John, that he revered John. When the Bible says the "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" it's not saying we are to shake in our boots at the thought of God but that we are to be in awe of, respect and revere God. Same thing here. But because Herod was fascinated by John Herodias

could not have him killed. We're also told that when Herod listened to John he was greatly puzzled. We need to spend a few lines on that word as well. The Greek word that is translated as "puzzled" here is *opereia*- it means to be paralyzed by indecision. The basic idea is that if you're on a journey (and aren't we all?) and you come to a crossroads your indecision will paralyze you. There are two roads and maybe you really would like to go down one but you're afraid to and so you don't move. You sit where you are immobilized.

It's one of the words the Bible uses to describe doubt and what a great mental picture of doubt it is. Herod was "puzzled" by John meaning that John was painting a picture and inviting Antipas to a whole new way of going about life that was very attractive to him. But Herod could never bring himself to take that path because of what he would lose if he did. So what did Herod do? He sat at the crossroads paralyzed by his indecision. We'll spend some time tomorrow looking at what this doubt does to us but for today maybe spend some time reflecting once again on whether you yourself might be at a crossroads that offers two paths but your own indecision is keeping you from going down either one.

Wednesday Reflection: This week we are looking to Herod Antipas to teach us what NOT to do when it comes to our doubts. And I don't know if you've ever thought of it this way but doubts are like belly buttons- everybody has them. But just because everybody has them doesn't mean that everybody admits they have them- not even to themselves. Yesterday we talked about one of the Bible words used to describe doubt- *aporeia* which means to stand before a crossroads paralyzed by our own indecision. When Mark tells us that John The Baptizer "puzzled" Herod what we are meant to understand is that John laid out a path that truly attracted Herod but he just couldn't bring himself to walk down that path because of what he'd lose. So Herod did nothing but continue to listen to John preach about what a horrible person he was for marrying his niece/sister-in-law Herodias. So one way the Bible describes doubt is to stand at a crossroads paralyzed by indecision. Another way to describe doubt is found in the book of James:

When you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. James 1:6-8 (NIV)

Here we see James use the literal word for doubt, "*diakreeno*" but also a word to describe this condition- *dipsakos* which is translated as "double minded". And when I say double minded I mean exactly that- it means to be literally of two minds which goes along well with the idea of standing at a crossroads without going anywhere because, as my brother in law Jeff Martin liked to say, he felt strongly both ways. Being double minded gives the same idea- someone that is double minded feels strongly both ways and can't make a decision. Turns out that's what doubt does to us.

I heard one preacher say it's like walking up to a treadmill that's moving slowly. Once you step onto the treadmill you've got to make a decision- do I start walking and try to catch up with the belt or do I step off because I don't think I can gracefully stay on it? That's being double minded. The true danger lies in not making a decision because if you don't start walking and you don't step off then you're headed for disaster.

I don't know what your definition of doubt is- especially when it comes to the concept of faith/belief but the church I grew up in made me believe that the smallest amount of doubt was deadly to our salvation. That if you have anything other than 100% certainty then you're not welcome in Jesus' kingdom. And I understand why people believe that- even the passage we just read from James chapter one suggests that any doubt is a disqualification.

But is it?

There's this great story that we will get to eventually as we go through The Year(s) Of Following Jesus lesson series where a man brings his demon possessed son to Jesus to see if there was anything Jesus could do. He says to Jesus, "if there's anything you can do please help us." Did you notice the doubt word in the father's request? That little two letter word, if. How much faith would you say that dad has in Jesus' ability to help them? Enough to ask but not enough to suggest 100% certainty, am I right? Based on what I was taught by the church I grew up in I would expect Jesus to react violently to the man and tell him to pound sand. But what does Jesus actually do?

"What do you mean, 'If I can'?" Jesus asked. "Anything is possible if a person believes."

The father instantly cried out, "I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!"

Mark 9:23-24 (NLT)

And do you know what Jesus does? He heals the kid. So let me ask you, how much faith is enough and how much doubt is too much for Jesus to be willing to help us? It sounds to me like that dad was in a similar place as Herod Antipas is with John. He's filled with doubt that is paralyzing him with indecision because he feels strongly both ways. The difference between Antipas and the father of the possessed boy is that the dad broke through his paralysis and did something. Antipas didn't. Antipas stayed right where he was at that crossroads until it was too late (sorry for the spoilers).

So as we finish for today let me say this- doubt is not fatal. But letting our doubts keep us from moving forward is. I don't know how we'd quantify the doubt and faith respectively of Herod and the dad but I'm going to give it a go by saying they both had doubt and they both had some form of faith/belief. One of them broke free from his indecision and found salvation for his son and the other stayed paralyzed. The results were disastrous for Herod. We'll look at one way to see doubt as a positive force in our lives of faith tomorrow but maybe today spend some time reflecting on how much doubt is too much and how much faith is too little for us to bring to Jesus. Please don't let your doubts paralyze you.

Thursday Reflection: So we've learned what doubt is and how destructive it can be to our lives. Now we turn to what to do about that. In Psalm 73 the Bible gives us a picture of what doubt does to us in practical terms:

I almost lost my footing. My feet were slipping, and I was almost gone... Then I realized that my heart was bitter, and I was all torn up inside. I was so foolish and ignorant- I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you. Yet I still belong to you; you hold my right hand. Psalm 73:2-23 (NLT)

Doubt puts us on insecure footing. It causes us to trip, to slip and eventually to fall. Unless we recognize it for what it is and decide to deal with it. The amazing thing about Psalm 73 to me is that it shows us that doubt isn't the unforgivable sin. At the end of the psalm Asaph (the author of this particular psalm) says something I find amazing- "yet I still belong to you, you hold my right hand." Even in the midst of our deepest doubts that threaten to bring us down we are still His. He never let go of our hand even when we couldn't feel it or His presence. That's comforting but it doesn't change the pain and the isolation we feel while going through times of doubt/indecision/two minds. What should I do when I'm in the midst of doubt?

I think this story of Herod and John The Baptizer teaches us that we should see these moments of doubt for what they are- a window of opportunity. I think that's the whole point of this story- that Antipas had a window of opportunity to get on the right path. But if we subscribe to modern Americanized Christianity that sees doubt as nothing but a negative then we'll miss the opportunity that exists within that doubt. When we are filled with doubt it's important that we not miss that opportunity to clarify what's really important. What our lives should be about and what they should not be about. Doubt is not the unforgivable sin. It is simply a part of being human. Otherwise why would the Bible say something like this:

Be merciful to those who doubt. Jude :22

I never heard that verse read in church while I was growing up. I was shocked the first time I read it when I decided to read the New Testament for myself to see what I might be missing. This is a big one. Don't beat up on people struggling with doubt- be merciful to them. Really this is one of the big differences between religion and the Gospel. Religion is man's attempt to ascend to God and perform to a level at which we earn our salvation. The Gospel is God reaching down to weak humans who could never earn their salvation. Religion is, I obey therefore I am accepted. The Gospel is, I'm accepted so out of gratitude I obey. I know it's a subtle difference but it's an important one. It's also the line that differentiates whether we see doubt as the unforgivable sin or as a stepping stone to a greater faith (which it can be). Religious people say, because I believe so strongly and completely that I don't ever doubt and that's why I'm saved. If someone comes along asking questions that suggest even a hint of doubt we attack and believe we're standing up for Jesus. But Jesus didn't mind doubts.

Remember that dad that brought his son to Jesus asking for healing? Remember what he said when Jesus told him that He could heal the boy if he had enough faith? And remember what that dad said? "I do believe but help me with my unbelief!" What is that? That's doubt and faith wrapped up in the same sentence. And Jesus didn't cast the man out. He didn't scold him for his doubts. He just healed the kid:

He said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. Mark 9:25-27 (NLT)

How is that possible? If doubt is such a negative thing and if it's a deal breaker when it comes to walking with Jesus then what do we do with this story? How did that dad get healing/salvation for his son with that kind of weak faith and so much obvious doubt? Well, because the healing/salvation didn't depend on the quality of the dad's faith- it depended upon the object of his faith.

I remember once when I was climbing in the foothills behind the house I grew up in. It was called Cucamonga Canyon and it was a fantastic place to grow up. Our house was one of the last before you hit the San Bernardino national forest so there were no more houses and I could walk out of my house and into the canyon and start exploring. One time I decided I'd take a shortcut and climb out of the canyon in a place where it was steeper than my normal route. I was almost to the top when I could feel myself losing my balance. There were lots of plants trying to grow out of the side of the canyon and I grabbed one that looked like it might hold me- but it didn't. I continued to teeter and grabbed another plant but it came right out by the roots as well. As I approached the point of no return I saw one more plant and I didn't have any more faith in it than I did in the two plants that were pulled out by the roots but I grabbed it anyway because it was my last hope of not tumbling down the hill and probably sustaining some pretty serious injuries- but this time the plant held and I got my balance and finished climbing to safety.

Here's my question- how much faith did I have in that third plant to save me? And how much doubt did I have that it would pull out by the roots like the other two? I think you know the answer. I had very little faith and lots of doubt. But if I had, let's say 10% faith that the plant would save me as I grasped for it does that mean that when it held I was only 10% saved from tumbling down and (like Jack and Jill) breaking my crown? Nope. I was 100% saved even with only 10% worth of faith. Why? Because it wasn't the quality of my faith that saved me- it was the object of my faith.

I'm not saying it's a perfect analogy but it's pretty close. The reason doubt cannot be the dealbreaker I was always taught that it was is because our salvation is not based on the quality of our own faith but on the object of that faith- Jesus. The dad with the demon possessed boy who blurted out, "I do believe but help me with my unbelief" is the perfect example. Why does a prayer like that get results from Jesus? Because it relies on the object of our faith (Jesus) and not the quality of our faith.

Herod could have been saved by listening to John The Baptizer. He could have moved past his paralysis and indecision and made the choice to start walking on the path that Jesus was laying down and he would have been saved. Not because of the quality of his own faith but because of the object of his faith. But he Herod's window of opportunity closed when something happened to Herod. We'll talk about that tomorrow but for today maybe spend some time reflecting on where you put your confidence- is your confidence in the quality of your own faith or is it in the object of your faith?

Friday Reflection: Yesterday we talked about looking at doubt as a window of opportunity. Opportunity for what? Well, an opportunity to clarify what's really important so that I can move forward in the direction that will save me. And again, this is not simply about either believing in Jesus or not. Fully devoted followers of Jesus have to

be on their guard about doubt too. Faith is not something you affirm once and then never have to worry about it again. It's a constant, moment by moment battle with your doubts that if we're not careful we will allow to paralyze us in the midst of our journey with Jesus. These times of doubt are windows of opportunity to change the direction of our lives but these windows don't stay open forever. They close. Sometimes rapidly and without warning. That's exactly what happened to Herod Antipas. If you remember Antipas put John The Baptizer in prison because John had spoken out about Herod marrying his niece/sister-in-law Herodias. Herodias wanted John killed but Herod feared John and was fascinated by him so he kept him in prison. But then Mark tells us this:

Finally the opportune time came. Mark 6:21 (NIV)

The opportune time for what? The opportune time for whom? Well, not for Herod. It was the opportune time for Herodias to get what she wanted and force Herod's hand. What happened? Herod threw a dinner party with lots of important guests that he wanted to impress. During the party Herodias' daughter, Salome (who would have been Herod's great-niece) danced for the guests. Scholars will tell you this was basically the modern equivalent of a strip show- a pole dance (as if you weren't already creeped out enough by this guy, huh?). When she was done Herod was so "pleased" that he blurted out an offer:

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." And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom." Mark 6:22-23 (NLT)

Salome goes to ask her mom, Herodias, what she should ask for and her mom knew that her moment had come to finally see to it that John The Baptizer was silenced completely:

So the girl hurried back to the king and told him, "I want the head of John the Baptist, right now, on a tray!" Then the king deeply regretted what he had said; but because of the vows he had made in front of his guests, he couldn't refuse her. Mark 6:25-26 (NLT)

Why couldn't Herod refuse her? Because there was something more important to Herod than the road that John was inviting him to walk- his reputation. He was filled with doubt and attracted to the path that John The Baptizer was pointing to and the path he had been on all of his life. And so he had stood paralyzed and double minded until the moment his window of opportunity to change had closed. Salome and Herodias had slammed that window shut and Herod didn't open it back up. Instead he bowed to his pride and had John beheaded. And now the doubt was gone for Herod. He never looked back (as far as I can tell anyway). In fact when you read the story about Jesus' trial Herod makes another appearance:

When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. Luke 23:8-11 (NLT)

What happened to Herod? Why now does he mock Jesus rather than being open to Him? I'm sure I'm oversimplifying this but part of it has to be that his window of opportunity closed and he committed himself all the more firmly to the path he had always walked and so the path described by John The Baptizer no longer held any allure for him. Does it mean he would never have another chance to change? No. But these opportunities don't come as often as we'd like to think. If you're currently at a crossroads that fills you with indecision and you pretty much know that one road is the right one and the other is a road that you know you should stop walking on then I pray you'll be thinking of Herod as you contemplate (prayerfully) what you should do. I have one more story to tell you and then we'll be done for this week.

When I was almost 21 me and a friend were 3 1/2 years into a life of addiction. We always talked about how we knew we couldn't live the way we were living for the rest of our lives but we couldn't seem to find the offramp. In July of 1985 we were both going on vacation for a week. We decided that we'd use that vacation time with our families to start down a new path of recovery from addiction. When I got back a week later (my friend had gotten home the night before I did) we met up and he had some drugs. I was shocked and nervous. His thinking was we'll have one last party and then stop forever.

But I couldn't. I knew I couldn't. I told him so and he asked why. Because if I have one more party it won't stop there. I knew it wouldn't. I knew if I had one more night of partying that I'd be back in the exact same place the next year even more addicted and out of control than I was in 1985. Reluctantly we threw the drugs away and I've never looked back. My life changed forever on that day. Why? Because I saw my window of opportunity and I took it. Somehow this stupid 20 year old kid sensed that if he didn't take this opportunity the window just might close forever on my- just like it did for Herod (not that I knew the story of Herod at that point but you take my meaning, right?).

If I hadn't taken my "doubts" (indecisive and double minded about which path to take) as an opportunity I shudder to think about what I might have missed out on. I never would have gone to Bible college (at least not when I did). I would never have met my wife Judy. I never would have come to Alaska to get to know Judy's family and become part of church in Eagle River that would change my life. I never would have gone to work for that church. I never would have known most of you reading this right now. That would have been a tragedy for me and I'm glad it didn't turn out that way.

Would God have been able to redeem my life if I had spent one more year in addiction (or two or three or four or...)? Sure. That's His specialty- taking broken things and making them whole. But my life would have been far different if I hadn't taken my doubts in 1985 and with a mustard seeds worth of faith feebly attempted to walk on the path God was calling me to. So how about you? Can you look back at windows of opportunity that you climbed through in the past? Can you look back at windows that you didn't climb through and they closed while you were wrestling with your doubts? Are you at a crossroads right now but you're paralyzed by doubt, indecision and a double mind? Don't be like Herod. Don't let that window close. Go through it and you will discover more of what God created you to do/be/become.