

Preview of Coming Attractions
Mark 6:14-29, Hebrews 13:1-3
The First United Presbyterian Church of Craffton Heights
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Pastor Dave Carver

*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/sermon05-06-2018.mp3>*

As we continue our study of Mark's gospel, you will be forgiven if you find this reading hard to accept. After all, it seems so far-fetched, doesn't it? Who could think the powerful leader of an entire nation – a nation that saw itself as an example of moral purity, and whose leader enjoyed the complete support of the nation's religious conservatives – who could even imagine that a leader such as that might be involved in multiple marriages, messy divorces, and tawdry cover-ups? I know, it seems far-fetched, but please use your imaginations to at least consider whether such a thing could ever actually happen... Because, as the late, great Casey Stengel once said, "You could look it up."

Before you think you know what I'm saying with this scripture text and a sermon titled "Previews of Coming Attractions", let's take a look at what is happening here.

Our text introduces us to "King Herod". This is not the same Herod of whom we spoke a few months ago at Christmas. *That* Herod, also known as "Herod the Great", was the man that the Romans installed to serve as their client king over most of Palestine. Herod the Great was the ruler who met the wise men and who ordered the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem. When he died several years after the birth of Jesus, his territory was divided among three of his sons and a daughter. Today's Herod, also called "Herod Antipas", was in charge of Galilee and some territory to the East of the Jordan river.



¹Herod Antipas divorced his first wife so that he could marry a woman named Herodias. That might have been messy enough, but Herodias was also married to Antipas' brother, whom Mark calls Philip but who apparently was actually, if not creatively, named Herod II. Furthermore, not only was she Antipas' sister-in-law, she was also his niece.

Mark tells us that the most powerful religious prophet of the day, John the Baptist, had pointed out to anyone who would listen how immoral and unsavory this arrangement was, thus earning the hatred of Herodias in particular. As you've heard, Herodias finally got her wish to have John silenced when her husband/uncle was running his mouth at a birthday party he'd given for himself.

By itself, it is a disturbing story for lots of reasons. However, as we are looking at the Gospel of Mark, I think it's fair to ask why Mark tells us this story. What reason would he have for thinking that, out of all the important things to say about Jesus, the Kingdom, and the community that formed as a result of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, it was important to spend fifteen verses talking about the death of Jesus' cousin?

Well, for starters, this story reveals the growing power of the movement that the Kingdom of which Jesus spoke had begun. When the Gospel of Mark begins, Jesus is an itinerant Rabbi wandering the backcountry of the Galilee. He's got some impressive credentials and can preach up a storm, but by worldly standards he is nobody. Yet as the Gospel progresses, people start to pay attention. The crowds get larger, and soon enough Herod Antipas takes notice. The author of the second Gospel wants us to know that the

¹ *St. John the Baptist Rebuking Herod*, Giovanni Fattori (19th c.)

person and work of Jesus was garnering some significant acclaim – so much so that the local government begins to get concerned about who Jesus is and what he is saying.

From a literary perspective, I think that the author of Mark is truly giving us a “preview of coming attractions” in this section. There are some real and important parallels with what happens in this encounter between Herod Antipas and John and the trial and crucifixion of Jesus as ordered by Pilate. Look at this:

- In both instances, the civil authority is more than a little fascinated by a religious teacher, and appears to be willing to keep him around for a while.
- Both Herod Antipas and Pilate fall prey to their own egos and make the mistake of trying to impress a crowd with some sort of lavish gesture.
- Each ruler allows himself to be manipulated by the hostility of another party – in Antipas’ case, it was Herodias, while in Pilate’s it was the Jewish leaders.
- At the end of the day, both Antipas and Pilate are reduced to being mostly spectators at an execution for which they in fact bear prime responsibility – they become impotent actors in dramas that grow beyond themselves.



²Okay, those things may give us an insight as to why Mark feels it’s important for us to know about the death of John, but why does he tell us this story now? Jesus is clearly on a roll as his movement is taking off in Galilee; we’ve just seen an instance where Jesus is transferring some of his power and authority to his disciples

² *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, Puvis de Chevannes, 1869

as he sends them out into the countryside... why does Mark interrupt himself at this point with what is essentially a “flashback” episode – he breaks his train of thought to tell us something that had evidently occurred some time previous. Why would he do that?

Do you remember what I said a couple of weeks ago about the “Markan sandwich”? We looked at chapter 5, and discovered how Mark started to talk about a man named Jairus and his sick daughter, and then interrupted himself to talk about the healing of a woman who had been sick for a long time, and then went back to the story of Jairus and his daughter. As we talked about that passage, we noted that there are times when Mark chooses to insert some apparently unrelated material in the middle of a narrative in such a way that allows us to see both the original narrative and the interruption in a different light. Here, he’s doing that again.

The first part of the “sandwich” is the passage we had last week: Jesus sent out the disciples to proclaim the nearness of the Kingdom of God.

The interruption is our text for this week: the death of John at the hands of Herod. And the conclusion of the sandwich will be our text for next week: the return of the disciples which leads to the feeding of the 5,000. Let’s think for a moment about how these seemingly unrelated stories can help to interpret each other.

One of the themes in the Gospel of Mark is that the movement of the Holy Spirit is a threat to those who yearn for or worship the power or illusion of success that this world has to offer. Do you remember that in chapter 1, we saw that just after Jesus began preaching about the nearness of the Kingdom, John was arrested by Herod Antipas? Here in chapter 6, the disciples give evidence of the nearness of

God's Kingdom, and we're told of John's death. In chapter 11, we'll read about how the masses are responding to the presence of the Kingdom on the day we know as Palm Sunday, and that leads to the arrest and death of Jesus. In chapter 13, Jesus gives his "farewell speech" to his disciples and he warns them that when they preach the Gospel, it will mean trouble for them and for those whom they love.



³So one could argue that inserting a story about the death of John the Baptist into an account of disciples who are trying to point faithfully to the coming of the Kingdom of God is, for all intents and purposes, a "preview of coming

attractions" for the ones who are Mark's first audience – the Christians who are struggling to have faith while living under Nero's persecutions in first-century Rome. Perhaps those believers have begun to wonder what they had done to deserve this kind of treatment and whether Jesus himself could be trusted, and Mark uses this story to say, "Hold on! Hang in there! Be of good courage. I see that you are facing imprisonment and suffering and death, and trust me – the story isn't over yet! Nothing of eternal consequence has been lost!"

Can you see how that interpretation might fit for the first readers of this Gospel nearly 2000 years ago?

Unfortunately, there are too many 21st century American Christians who will read this passage and say, "Oh, thank you so much, Mark, for including this story. We, too, are suffering horrible persecution for our faith and this is a great encouragement to us."

³ *The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayer*, by [Jean-Léon Gérôme](#) (1883)

A recent survey⁴ indicated that a majority of white Evangelical Christians see themselves as the most oppressed group in the USA. It's people who look like me, by and large, who believe that they face more persecution than anyone else: more than Muslims, more than atheists, more than sexual minorities. When pressed for evidence of this claim, we hear about

- The county clerk who works in a state where same-sex marriage is legal and who must therefore act against her conscience in issuing marriage licenses to homosexual couples
- A Hollywood celebrity who is passionately outspoken about her views concerning gender and sexuality is disinvited from an appearance on a television program hosted by someone with differing views.
- The Christian church that is threatened with the loss of its tax-free status after its pastor campaigned for a particular candidate in a recent election.

When I hear this, I'm sorry to say, I am tempted to respond with something less than compassion. Don't get me wrong – there are important issues here, and they deserve to be discussed. But to say that I am being persecuted because someone disagrees with me is, at best, a stretch and at worst, an outright lie. The white church in America is experiencing some grief at the loss of extensive privilege that it has enjoyed for hundreds of years. I get that. But let's not call loss of privilege "persecution" or "oppression". These are differences of opinion or inconveniences or cultural change, not victimization.

⁴ <https://www.prii.org/research/lgbt-transgender-bathroom-discrimination-religious-liberty/>

A writer for *Foreign Policy* magazine recently put it this way:

How will we know when American Christians are genuinely under threat? When they start changing their names from the obviously biblical “Andrew” and “Mary” to the more secular “William” or “Jennifer” in order to avoid hiring discrimination. When Christians in Congress hide their faith and instead loudly claim to be atheists. When Christians are regularly blocked from buying homes or renting apartments in the good parts of town. When the president of the United States calls for Christians to be banned from the country. Then we can start taking claims of religious discrimination at face value.⁵

A few moments ago I read to you a passage of Scripture that contains a direct commandment that is, unfortunately, impossible for many of my Christian sisters and brothers to keep. Hebrews 13:3 tells us to “remember those who are in prison...and those who are suffering...”

Most of us are literally incapable of doing this. We cannot “remember” those who are imprisoned or who are suffering torture because we have never known them. The word “remember” implies some sort of previous knowledge. “Do you remember the last time that the Pirates won the World Series?” is an appropriate question, because that has happened in at least some of our lifetimes. Yet if I were to ask, “Do you remember that time you had your photo taken with President Lincoln?”, that would be nonsense – because you cannot remember that which you never knew.

⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/12/12/no-christians-do-not-face-looming-persecution-in-america/?utm_term=.1c61c5fc9ff9

In the same way, too many of us have no awareness of or connection with those who are truly struggling or facing persecution for their faith.

Mark chapter 6 cries out to the church in Pittsburgh in 2018 to do at least four things.



First, can we all get down on our knees at some point today and cry out with thanksgiving to God for the fact that you and I have never known the kinds of anguish and suffering inflicted on John the Baptist, Jesus, the first disciples, or the earliest followers of Jesus?

Second, before we stand up from that prayer, we need to repent of and give up the notions of privilege that equate our loss of privilege with someone else's suffering.

Thirdly, will you invest an hour of your time in the week to come learning about and looking for ways to somehow be connected with someone who truly is marginalized or persecuted? Go home and do a quick Google search on the kinds of oppression faced by women and sexual and religious minorities in the nation of Pakistan. Learn about the fact that there are only 300000 Christians in the entire nation of North Korea, and as many as 75,000 of them are currently in forced-labor camps. Ask me about the South Sudanese pastors I know who have not seen their families for months because they've had to choose between serving the Lord and living in a safe neighborhood.

Here's the deal, beloved: this chapter is not included in the Book of Mark as an "attaboy" to me, encouraging me to bear up under the intense persecution that I, as a 57 year old white man in the richest country the world has ever known, must be experiencing. Instead, I think that it is here as a

reminder for me to ask, each and every day, “How does the Gospel with which I’ve been entrusted affect any of the folks in the scenarios above? What can I do to create a world that is more in line with the reign and rule of God that Jesus called ‘the Kingdom’, and how can I point to its nearness in the lives of those who truly are suffering?”

The author of Mark makes it pretty plain that Jesus was directly and viscerally impacted by the persecution and death of John. In what ways am I bothered by the injustices of our age, and what am I willing to do about it? May God have mercy on me as I seek to respond as did Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.