

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
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The Choices We Make

Herod, ruler of Galilee, personifies what we imagine the typical Roman ruler was, rich and ruthless. He has legions of Roman soldiers to carry out his every command. He leaves impressive monuments all over the area he governs, and he uses and abuses his power. He steals his brother's wife, locks up John the Baptist in his jails, and then has the prophet beheaded as a party favour for his step daughter. He does however feel a little remorse in killing John, but he also feels he must protect his image in front of his guests by honouring his careless vow.

John the Baptist, although loud and boisterous, was a prophet who was the profile of courage. His ministry was, to bring the people from their sins, and to their Saviour. He preached the necessity of repentance and it was expressed by his unending commitment to speak the truth. John confronted King Herod over his adulterous marriage to his brother's wife, Herodias, an act John considered a moral outrage.

The accusation so angered Herodias that she was determined to destroy John, if given a chance. Some scholars believe that King Herod put John in prison to keep the Queen and her henchmen from killing him. For despite John's rebuke, King Herod Antipas still feared and respected the prophet, considering him a man of sincerity and goodness. Mark tells us that "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." (Mark 6:20).

But, then, one night, Herodias got her chance. Her daughter danced a dance that pleased Herod a whole lot. I don't even want to think about what kind of dance it was. Any other father would have put a stop to it immediately, but not Herod! He told the girl that she was wonderful and offered her anything she wanted -- up to half of his kingdom. So, the girl did what young girls often do when faced with a great decision -- she went to get her mother's advice. What should she ask for? The answer was easy! She should ask for John's head. And so she did -- even adding her own touch -- she not only asked for John's head, but asked for it on a platter!

Herod is caught in a web of complex personal and social relationships. He wants to please his spouse but if he pleases his spouse, he will kill a righteous and holy man. He wants to seem like a generous ruler to Galilean society but still seem powerful to the rest of his kingdom. He is taken aback by his daughter's grotesque request and yet he wants to keep his word. And of course, he wants to follow his own beliefs and protect a man that he believes is some kind of prophet. Basically, he is trying to please many different groups of people and still find a way to keep his own integrity. This is a position many of us can relate to. How many of us have to make decisions every day that affect different groups of people? And how often do we feel like no one is happy with a decision? Or do we feel like everyone is happy with our choice but our own conscience?

Herod shows us that sin's consequences outlive what we expect. Killing John haunted Herod so much that when Jesus came preaching, his first thought was "This is John, whom I beheaded; he has been raised from the dead" (Mark 6:16). He was still thinking about John and feeling guilty! He knew he had done wrong, and his foolishness still tormented him. He is reminiscent of Joseph's brothers, who, years after selling him into slavery, thought that any minor problem was punishment for what they had done. When Joseph demanded that Simeon stay in Egypt, "they said to one another, 'we are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore, this distress has come upon us'" (Gen 42:21). How many problems in life had they thought were punishment for their sin? It truly haunted them, just as Herod's sin haunted him.

These physical consequences of sin far outlive what we would expect. Beer commercials don't tell us about wrecked homes, drunk driving deaths, cirrhosis, and alcoholism. Sex sells, but we're not told what we're really buying—loneliness because of unfaithfulness, disease, unwanted pregnancy. These are not the things we're thinking of when we're tempted. Yet Herod reminds us that sin's consequences long outlive what we would think. Sin's pleasures will pass, and what will be left with? Herod's birthday is long in the past, but his foolish decision speaks to us today. Let's be careful of the influence people can have over us both good and bad. Let us learn to make better decisions in temptation, remembering God's promise and what is truly at stake. Let us consider the disastrous consequences that sin will bring us.

Even Herod was horrified at the idea -- but he was also trapped. All the important people in his kingdom were at that banquet, and they had heard his offer -- and they had also heard the daughter's request. Herod found himself between the devil -- literally -- and the deep blue sea. He didn't want to kill John, but he also didn't want to embarrass himself in front of his friends. And so, he did kill John -- just as he and Pilate would later kill Jesus. We need to hear that too.

If life was difficult for Christians in Mark's day, it is often difficult for us as well. 9/11 reminded us that we live in a dangerous world -- a world where we can no longer take it for granted that we are safe from attack. Persecution of Christians is rampant in many parts of our world today. And then there are the more personal threats -- threats from without and threats from within. When I was growing up, lots of people didn't even lock their doors. With minor exceptions, a person could walk the streets at night without fear of attack. It would seem that those days are gone forever. Now we hide behind security systems in our homes and in our cars. We buy cell phones, in part, so that we can call for help if necessary.

The Gospel lesson reminds us that the task of following Jesus will never be easy. The road is rocky. Resistance can be expected. We still live in a world where those entrusted with political power live in fear that their authority will be challenged. Our leaders are not as outwardly wicked as King Herod, but they are often just as spineless, committed to expediency, and willing to compromise truth, justice, and compassion if they think it will win some votes and guarantee their election.

We are all faced with decisions every day, some smaller and some larger: How do we deal with our child who is having a tantrum in the grocery store? What is the best way to ask for time off

from work for an important family event? Whom should we be friends with? Should we look at our classmate's answer to a difficult question on a test? And on a larger scale, we might wonder whom should we vote for in a national election? Or if it is more important to reduce national debt or to add more governmental programs? Is it better to let foreign nations figure out their own issues or is it better to intervene? These are the kinds of decisions we face every day, and this is why the line "But then an opportunity came" helps me find the grace in this passage. Even though on the surface this "opportunity" likely refers to Herod's wife's chance to get revenge on John the Baptist, it also presents an "opportunity" for Herod to choose grace and stand up against a decision he knows is wrong, even at the risk of disappointing a loved one. Because really every decision we make is an opportunity for grace.

We can choose to let grace in or to reject it. And this is what we learn from Herod's choice. Herod had an opportunity to welcome grace into a situation and instead he rejected it. He chose to satisfy the group of people around him and not his own conscience. This is something else we can all relate to. Have you ever made a decision where you felt like you caved to the social norm and didn't follow what you knew to be right? I certainly have, in fact I did it all the time, especially at work.

Many times, I made choices to please those around me and didn't follow my own moral compass, I chose to compromise my scruples to achieve a certain goal. I often made these decisions even though I thought it was not the right thing to do. It was easy for me justify these choices, in my mind anyway: I had to follow of certain regulations or rules, or it was too expensive or was forced to by conditions of my employment. The list goes on.

But the choices I cannot justify, those that keep me up at night, are those that allow me to complain about our worship services. Too many times I've said: I didn't get anything out of a certain service. I sometimes complain about the music or sometimes that the service was too long or sometimes that I didn't get anything out of the sermon. However, I've come to realize that at those times I made the unconscious choice of not vesting myself into the worship service. I was willing to just sit there and wait for someone else to do the work for me, someone else to inspire me. Unlike David, as we read this morning, who put all he had into loving and worshiping god. He was worshiping God with all his mind, all his heart, all his sprit, and all his strength.

David's dancing may have been part of a prolonged and complex liturgical procession. The details are long lost, but its intensity remains in the description of David's whirling and leaping. His gyrations almost convey a mood of desperation.

David's first and deepest allegiance was to God. And he saw it only fit to dance in celebration of the God who had chosen him and his descendants to be a covenant partner forever. David felt it to be inappropriate to come as the King of Israel - but rather as a common servant and partner with the people of God. Instead, David acknowledged the Kingship and Rule of God in Israel. He perceived his royal garments to be an impediment to worship God in humility and truth.

This calls for an unreserved celebration of our faith. As we celebrate and rejoice before God, as David and the Israelites did, we pass on the inheritance of our faith to generations yet to come. Our children and grandchildren will assimilate that which is most important to us. Therefore, may God's praise flow richly from our lives.

We are chosen by Jesus Christ to celebrate God's love and grace toward us. We are invited to be expressive in our gratitude toward God. The Christian life is a life of joy and celebration.

When our lives are touched by the love of God, His grace flows into this world through the channel of our love, healing it, straightening its twistedness, mending its brokenness, and enlightening its darkness. That is the celebration of the Christian life - to touch the lives of others and so invite them to experience the blessings of God.

Jesus invites us to be intentional about our celebration of God's grace. Let us not "relax and see what happens". Rather, let us express God's praise in every breath we take. Let us be a people who celebrate the goodness of God. To dance without worrying about who's watching. To sing without worrying if it's the right kind of music for church. To give without counting the cost. To serve the way God calls us to, without caring if anyone disapproves. Let's be more like King David, who was so excited his emotions could not be contained. He danced with reckless abandon, no sense of propriety. David had many flaws, but a lack of passion was not one of them.

This is the gift of this Gospel reading this morning! It calls on us to think about our choices. If we frame every choice we make as a chance to let grace into our lives, then we might make different choices. It is easy to make choices to please those around us, but as we learn from Herod's choice, this is not always the right thing to do. Herod had an opportunity for grace, but he decided against it. He decided to kill John the Baptist. So, let's learn from Herod's mistake. Before we make a decision, let's ask if we are making our decision to protect ourselves or to build up the kingdom of God? Because personally I would rather build up the kingdom, I would rather choose to do everything I could to love God with all my mind, all my heart, all my spirit and all my strength. How about you? Amen