

# Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

## LIFE WITH A FUTURE

Mark 6:14-29

6th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10)

Analysis by James Squire

14King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." 15But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." 17For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. 18For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20for 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. 21But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 22When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." 23And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." 24She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." 25Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." 26The king was deeply grieved; yet out of

regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, 28brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. 29When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

*Note: This gospel text is something of an oddity in Mark's Gospel: a story told after the fact. It may well be the only one of its kind in the entire book. The evangelist, for one moment, forgets about moving forward ("immediately") and instead looks back, through the eyes of King Herod, for whom the commissioning of Jesus' disciples brings back a painful memory. It is this memory we are treated to by Mark during this pause in the action. For any of Mark's readers who had been wondering, amidst the fast pace action, whatever happened to John the Baptist, this story brings them up to date as well. But for us, the story is a reminder that often, one person's success is another person's failure. That other person could be you or me.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: A Life Full of Regret**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Bubble Burst**

We think we've disposed of problems, avoided a bad situation, survived an ethical dilemma, and then it comes back to haunt us. Herod thought he had disposed of John, once and for all, and yet deep down inside, he knew that wasn't a safe assumption. Herod had had a love-hate relationship with John. On the one hand, this pesky prophet was a pain in the rear. On the other hand, John was obviously a man of God worthy of respect. Actually, it was fitting that Herod should be haunted by the idea that John had been raised, for he had intended never to assassinate John

in the first place. Herodias put him between a rock and a hard place, and he had chosen the hard place, hoping against hope that the pressure of the rock would not do him in. Instead of protecting the man of God, he protected his own honor. Now this man of God seemingly had returned-proving that we can't really run away from our bad choices. Sooner or later, they catch up with us.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Weak Fear***

Behind all these bad choices is the heart's bad choice. Behind the haunting is the God who haunts. Herod is haunted because he values his own name and honor more than the truth conveyed by the respected prophet. Hearing of all the miracles and healing going on, he is certain that John has returned from the dead – hence is indestructible. But it was not John who was haunting him, for John always spoke of Jesus and Herod had heard him speak many times. Herod feared John, perceiving him as a threat to Herod's authority, but the true threat to Herod's authority was Jesus himself. Fearing the wrong person/thing is always a sign of misplaced trust. We fear that which we trust.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Haunted Hell***

Fearing the wrong person/thing can also be fatal. One might think that Herod would be relieved that John rose from the dead. "No harm, no foul," he might have thought. But instead he found the news dreadful, undoubtedly because he knew there would be hell to pay and he would be asked to pay it. In fact, would it even matter which man of God Herod encountered from now on? How could he ever feel comfortable with such an encounter? God had become a righteous judge to him, one who was bound to judge him for his actions with no reprieve. How could there be? Such is the hell Herod found himself in. His enemy could not be put down forever. His defeat was inevitable.

## PROGNOSIS: A Life Healed by Christ

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *Crucified Critique*

As is true for almost everyone in Mark's gospel, Herod's privileged point of view prevents him from seeing what was truly inevitable: His defeat would be taken on by Christ a hill outside Jerusalem, and Christ's Life would become his. This Jesus was not coming to get him, he was coming to bring the kingdom of God near, offer the opportunity for repentance, and encourage belief in the good news (Mark 1:15). This was Jesus' mission statement. Like John, he was fearless in his ministry, showing no fear of the authorities, just the kind of person who scared Herod the most. But instead of destroying Herod or the Chief Priests or anyone else with power, he kept his eyes on the prize: salvation for all, through his crucifixion on the Cross. His single-mindedness meant that he suffered the punishment that John warned Herod about. Accusation of authority boomeranged on Jesus himself, until he was the one forsaken by God. In the process he offered salvation to folks like Herod and you and me, all folks who could not bear up under divine critique. We took that critique and pinned him to the cross with it, and he left it buried in the grave forever, freeing us from our captivity to the lesser gods of political power and personal pride.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** : *Freedom Born of Faith*

Our hearts are embraced with this freedom through the workings of the Spirit of Christ. The single reason we feel captive is because we feel trapped, as if it is too late to undo the past choices we have made, not just in our actions, but more importantly in our heart. By fulfilling his mission, Christ did what we could not (even powerful Herod): erase history, not just once, but once for all. The heart's bad choice is cleansed. It

is no longer “too late” to start over. In fact, starting over is as simple as Jesus’ mission statement: Repent and believe the Good News. It is not, of course, easy, but the Holy Spirit of Christ is in our corner, giving us the strength to start over. With baptism into Christ, you can go home again. Even Herod can go home again. Home is the waters of baptism in Christ, which as Bob Bertram often playfully suggested, takes us “Back to our Future.”

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Bold Confession***

Best of all, we are free to face our problems head-on instead of trying to dispose of them. Even Herod can listen to a man of God and enjoy and respect his prophetic message without being perplexed by it. We can face our sins without fear because they have already done their worst – to Christ, in our stead. There is no earthly consequence that can compete with the divine consequence that has already been suffered for us by Jesus. Moreover, Herod would find that his position and name in the kingdom of God that Jesus brings would greatly exceed his political position and his name among his subjects. It would give him a new source of strength for his political life, a source that can never be weakened, not by a Roman Emperor, not by foreign armies, not by his guards, not by the Sanhedrin, not by anyone. Likewise, we are no longer haunted by our bad choices, favors owed, peer allegiances, or closet skeletons. The burdens that have accumulated around us do not imprison us anymore. Furthermore, we are emboldened to take Christ’s “Repent and Believe” ministry to the Herods around us, offering them a chance to go back to their future.