

## An Uncomfortable Truth

Mark 6:14-29

While the world around us changes at breakneck speed, there are some things that never change, and one constant is human nature. The story we just heard is 2,000 years old and yet as current as the daily headlines about governors who claim to be hiking the Appalachian Trail while they are really flying down to Argentina to visit their South American mistress.

The man Mark refers to as King Herod is actually Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, who tried to kill the baby Jesus some 30 years earlier. Antipas was one of four sons of Herod the Great, and Herod's kingdom had been split among the four sons, so, technically, Antipas was a "tetrarch," a governor – there's that word again – of one-fourth of his father's former kingdom, rather than a real king. And, besides, all four brothers were puppets the Romans, anyway. Caesar was true king of the region.

Antipas meets and falls in lust with Herodias, the wife of his brother, Phillip, and, interestingly, Herodias is actually the daughter of another brother of Phillip and Antipas, so both Phillip and then Antipas marry their niece. She seems to have quite an ambitious and scheming nature, as well. It evidently ran in the family. When Antipas proposes that she leave her husband, Phillip, and marry him, Herodias has a few demands of her own, the primary one being that Antipas divorce his present wife.

Herod Antipas does, indeed, divorce his wife, but, like most divorces, this comes at a hefty price. You see, the woman Antipas divorces is a princess, the daughter of a man named Aretas, who is the king of Arabia. Aretas does not take kindly to his daughter being treated like an old chariot that is being traded in for a new model, so, he gets his army together and attacks Antipas' army. Antipas' army is soundly defeated, a fact that the Jews interpreted as God's judgment on Antipas.

Enter John the Baptist. John is anything but a politician, which is why he never would have made it as a pastor. We pastors learn very quickly that rule number one in getting along in a church is to pick your battles. The risk-reward ratio for some things just makes them not worth tackling, but John the Baptist never considered risk-reward ratios or choosing his battles. So, when Antipas marries his brother's wife, John the Baptizer has something to say. Not only is this distasteful and just blatantly wrong, it is also illegal according to the law of Israel. Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21 state very clearly that a man is not to take his brother's wife as his own.

Herod finds John's rebuke to be *an uncomfortable truth*, and when you're a governor/king, uncomfortable truths are something you just don't need, so Herod has John arrested and put in prison. It seems that Herod has some real inner conflict about John the Baptist. On the one hand, Antipas finds John's criticism quite irritating. Herodias finds John's criticism even more irritating – to the point that she would just as soon her new husband permanently put John out of her misery by killing him. But, being much more the politician, Antipas realizes he will have a popular uprising on his hands if he kills John. Besides, Mark also says something really interesting about Antipas' attitude toward John. Mark says Antipas found John's preaching to be greatly perplexing, yet, he liked to listen to him! The Greek word translated "perplexed" means to be at a loss, not to know how to respond. So, Antipas would listen to John, be at a total loss as to how to respond to him, and, yet, he wanted to listen more. The truth John boldly spoke left Antipas feeling very uncomfortable, yet, he wanted to hear more.

Herodias had no desire to hear more; she had heard quite enough, and when her daughter's dancing pleases a very inebriated Antipas to the point of making some very unreasonable promises – half his kingdom was not even in Herod's power to give, without Caesar approving it, and you can be quite sure Caesar would not find the humor in giving that much of *Caesar's* kingdom to a sweet young thing who just won the ultimate dysfunctional family version of "So You Think You Can Dance." However, Caesar could not have cared less about Herodias' suggestion that her daughter ask for John's head served up on a silver platter, and, Herod Antipas ends up giving his new wife what she wants in spite of all his misgivings, and that is the end of John the Baptist, the end the uncomfortable truth-telling. Or is it?

Mark places this tragic story about John in a very strategic location – in fact, there is a message in where and how Mark tells us of John's death. Mark sandwiches the story of John in the middle of his story about the sending out and return of Jesus' disciples into the entire region, where they were to tell people about Jesus and use the authority Jesus had given them to cast out demons and heal people. The disciples actually do what Jesus tells them to and, wonder of wonders, it works! Word begins to spread about this Jesus in whose name demons are being cast out and people are being healed. Word even travels to the palace of Herod Antipas, who finds the news quite troubling. Herod sees in Jesus the same righteousness as he saw in John. He sees in Jesus the same courage to speak truth that he saw in

John. In fact, he sees in Jesus the very spirit of John, so much so, that he believes the spirit of the man he beheaded has entered Jesus to continue to haunt him.

He is wrong, of course. The spirit that is in Jesus is even more righteous than John, more fearless than John, more willing to sacrifice himself for the truth than John, and more able to be raised from the dead than John. But, by placing this account of John's death where he does, in the middle of the disciples' going out into the world to do Jesus' work, Mark is telling us all something about our responsibilities as Jesus' disciples. *He is saying that part of our work is to speak Jesus' truth even in situations that are uncomfortable.* The first place this happens is within our own lives – we are to face the truth that we ourselves are not so unlike Herod and Herodias. We like to pursue our desires and appetites, oftentimes in spite of the harm done to our bodies, our souls, and our relationships.

We are also to speak uncomfortable truths to those around us. Is it comfortable to mention at a dinner party that, as a Christ-follower, we are trying to cut back on our personal spending in order to give disadvantaged people more of an advantage? Is it comfortable to speak up at work to say that the bottom line of any business owned by a Christian is not profit vs. loss but how well we serve those around us? Is it comfortable to say to our friends that it is wrong to gossip about someone behind their back and we won't participate in it? Is it comfortable to say to a friend that their business practices or their marital unfaithfulness or whatever else it might be is wrong?

John spoke those kinds of uncomfortable truths, and so did Jesus, and so are we, even if the discomfort that truth causes ends up hurting us. Most of us don't need to worry about getting our heads chopped off, or getting crucified, but it may cost us some friendships, may cause us to be excluded, even talked about and laughed at behind our backs. And that's not very comfortable, either.

But, there's one more uncomfortable truth Mark reveals in this story, and that is the truth that, no matter what we think we've gotten away with, no matter how it might appear that wrong has won out over right, at the end of the day, the truth is what sets you free, and the wrong will not have the last word. Even if Herod thinks he has silenced John's troubling voice, that voice continues to haunt him. And later, when this same Herod goes along with the plan to crucify Jesus, he finds that that doesn't silence anything, either, for three days later, Jesus is alive and causing more trouble than he did before. And when we are criticized and ostracized for speaking the uncomfortable truth of Jesus to others, the good news is, that is not the last word, either. For the last word is always resurrection.

As one writer succinctly puts it, the message of this remarkable story is that "when the church rises up to be the church, the world will rise up to be the world. And when the world rises up to be the world, Jesus Christ will rise up to be Christ."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps that can be seen in the fate of Herod Antipas and his ambitious wife Herodias. In the year 39 AD, the famous Roman Emperor Caligula finally had enough of the antics of Herod and Herodias. He removed Herod Antipas from power and banished the husband and wife to the outer reaches of the Roman Empire, to the region of Gaul, most likely in what is now France, where they died penniless and powerless. When we rise up and speak uncomfortable truth to the world, the world rises up to be the world and tries to silence that truth. And when the world rises up to be the world, the uncomfortable truth for the world is, Jesus Christ rises up from the dead, victorious over sin and evil. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Long, Thomas G., Pulpit Resource, Vol. 28, No. 3. Logos Productions, Inver Grove Heights, MN, 2000, p. 13.