

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

What Mark writes in our text is tragic. It is tragic because a righteous man was martyred - a voice was silenced because he preached about sin and the good news of salvation. John the Baptist was killed because he was faithful and unafraid to confront sinners regardless of who they were. He was killed by a king who had been enticed to give his seductively dancing stepdaughter (Salome) the permission to ask for anything up to a half of his kingdom. Little did he know that she would consult her mother (the wife of the king) who would convince her to ask for the head of John the Baptist.

In our text for this morning we see John the Baptist surrounded by three unbelievers. All three play a role in bringing him to death. Yet, it is interesting to note that we see **Three Shades of Unbelief**. As we consider these three shades of unbelief they will magnify the truth of sin and grace, the cross of every believer in Jesus, the ultimate victory that we have in him, and they will further serve as warnings for us to be careful not to fall into the same unbelief.

First of all, let's take a look at Herod (Antipas) the king. Here we see a man who is "living the dream" and pretty much gets whatever he wants. When he has an "itch" (a sinful desire) he can usually "scratch it." While married to his first wife, Herod travels to Rome. While in Rome he falls for Herodias who is already married to his half-brother Philip. She also happens to be the daughter of Herod's other half-brother Aristobulus. That means that Herodias was Herod's half-niece. None of this causes Herod to pause. He takes her away from his half-brother Philip and marries her so that not only has he committed adultery, but he is in an incestuous relationship according to Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21. This was the talk of the region.

John the Baptist is not afraid to confront the sin of kings regardless of how dangerous they or their wives may be. Mark records for us that John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." Herod was pressured by Herodias to kill John the Baptist, but was afraid of him because he was a righteous and holy man. Therefore, he kept him safe. And, when he heard him speak, he was greatly perplexed, and yet the Bible tells us that "he heard him gladly."

Have you ever met an unbeliever like Herod? He is the person who is all about living a worldly life, but doesn't necessarily mind your presence despite the fact that you are a practicing Christian. In fact, they find some sort of strange comfort in your presence. You can talk to them for hours about Biblical matters and they seem to enjoy the conversation and are even intrigued by some of the things you are saying. It almost feels as if they know that something is wrong with their life, but they keep you around while having no intention of putting to death their sin. It's as if they need you to learn how to harden themselves to keep on sinning.

I recall how Satan took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple to tempt Jesus to throw himself off. Satan took him to what appeared to be a very safe place to put God to the test. No doubt John the Baptist would have tried to disturb Herod, and Herod was truly afraid, but Herod was also hardening himself by purposely keeping John the Baptist around. While Herod was pleased to keep John the Baptist alive and was no doubt

quite pleased with his own ability to resist his call to repent, and even though he was afraid of John the Baptist, the bottom line was that Herod was using him to harden himself in his resolve to sin. The more you attack your conscience and keep on sinning against it the more callous you become until you are no longer able to feel sin or be afraid. May God spare us of doing such things to ourselves.

Herodias was a different shade of unbelief, or maybe I should say that she was more advanced in her unbelief than her husband. The Bible tells us that “Herodias had a grudge against him (John the Baptist) and wanted to put him to death.” Here I am reminded of what Jesus said to his brothers who did not believe in him and were actually leading him down a bad road by encouraging him to go to a feast. Jesus said to them, “My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. *The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil.* You go up to the feast. I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come (John 7:6-7).”

John the Baptist spoke the truth about the sin of Herodias and she wanted him to die. Have you noticed that there are a growing number of people out there who desperately want to get rid of those who hold to Biblical Christianity? As the unbelieving world hated Jesus because he testified “about it that its works are evil,” we can certainly expect to receive the same whenever we speak the truth. So, just how brave are you when it comes to standing for the truth of sin and grace? I’m not saying that it’s our task to walk up to hungry lions whenever we see them and punch them in the face until they finally kill and devour us. Rather, I am asking if called upon to do so, will you stand for the truth and testify? Jesus warns us, “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven (Matt. 10:32-33).”

Salome is another shade of unbelief. She was the daughter of Herodias and the dancing girl at Herod’s banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. At the end of the dance (which was most likely erotic) Herod gives her a wish. She consults her mother who tells her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Salome was what we call an unbelieving “opportunist.” She was a person who exploited circumstances to gain immediate advantage rather than being guided by consistent principles.

Have you ever known a Salome? These are the unbelievers who appear to be fairly indifferent when it comes to Bible believing Christians unless they can be used for whatever. Then, such Christians are truly disposable. In her shade of unbelief she appears to fit somewhere in between Herod and Herodias. Still, lest we forget, when push comes to shove, they are all willing to get rid of John the Baptist to satisfy their appetites. Even for Herod, who at one time was protecting John, his desire to please his guests and preserve his reputation and power among them was a greater appetite than doing what was right and saving him. In these **Three Shades of Unbelief**, we are able to look through a window and see what we are up against.

Christ faced the same shades of unbelief. Consider Pontius Pilate who wanted to set Jesus free because he knew that he was righteous but could not because he was afraid of losing his position (he was like Herod who could not give us his lifestyle). Consider the religious leaders of the Jews who eagerly wanted to put Jesus to death because he exposed the truth about them (they were like Herodias who held a grudge). Consider Judas Iscariot who could not pass up the thirty pieces of silver (he was like Salome

the opportunist). Still, Jesus conquered them all. He gave up everything and submitted himself to the will of his Father in heaven that we might have everything good. He died so that we might have eternal life. He was sold for thirty pieces of silver that we might be bought and set free from sin, death, and hell. As you can see, Christ is victorious. We have the same. While we carry the burden of the cross as he did, in the end we win.

Consider these truths as well. John the Baptist was not the one in prison. Herod was in the true prison of sin. It was not John the Baptist who died when his head was cut off, for he lives in the presence of the living God. Herodias was the one who was truly dead. And while it looked as if John the Baptist lost everything to the opportunist, the truth was that he went to his forever treasure in heaven. Salome had exchanged the whole world for her soul (Matthew 16:26).

And moreover, we need to be aware of the fact that we are in danger of falling into the **Three Shades of Unbelief**. There is a Herod in all of us who would like to live in sin. May our sin be exposed as utterly sinful and thereby put to death that in the forgiveness of sins we may live in newness of life and not end up like Herod. There is a Herodias in all of us whenever we would prefer to kill the new life that is in Christ because we want to do what is evil instead and hate being exposed for who we are. May God give us strength by using the means of grace to struggle and overcome sin. And there is a Salome in all of us waiting to get out - a opportunist looking for an opportunity. In that case, may we replace every opportunity to lose our souls with the opportunity to refresh our souls with the body and blood of Jesus our only Savior, for in his supper he give us himself - he gives us everything good!

In closing, king Herod had every reason to be terrified that Jesus Christ was John the Baptist raised from the dead. Of course Jesus was not John, but it pointed to something that we need to remember. No matter what the shade of unbelief, all unbelief will have to face the truth. There is a resurrection of the dead and a reckoning with God. Those who are in Christ will rise unto eternal life. Those who are not will rise unto eternal death. Unlike Herod, may God give us a conscience at peace having been justified by the blood of Christ unto everlasting life!

Amen.

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