

SEPT 1, 2024

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Aug 25 sermon— ‘Heroes and Villains : Herods’ Matthew 2:16-23, Luke 23:6-12

This week we encounter not one but two figures in our series Heroes and Villains, Herod the Great and his son Herod Antipas, or Herod the Tetrarch. The two of them in scripture have interesting roles to play. Herod the Great tries to kill Jesus in the nativity story, but fails. Herod Antipas pardons Jesus in the crucifixion narrative, but his pardon fails and Jesus is executed anyway. Strange.

From that description it might seem like one was a clear villain and the other a hopeful hero that didn't get what he set out to get with his pardon. As we've seen before it's much more complicated than that. Herod the Great wasn't just some awful, jealous, paranoid king who was willing to murder however many innocents to get to the new “would be” king. He was a ruler over all Judea that brought great prosperity to that region. He was able to work his politics to keep some semblance of peace between both Jew and Gentile. He built and rebuilt cities. He rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem in grand splendor. Herod was known for incredible building projects. To demonstrate allow me to show you a few pictures of two of his palaces.

Pics of Masada and Herodian

Along with all of this ambitious constructing yes, Herod was known to have a cruel streak that grew crueler as he aged. It is well understood that his body was racked with disease that progressed as he got older. His mind was also compromised by this disease. He became unstable and paranoid. Herod rewrote his will several times as a result. He even murdered his wife and a good contingent of her family.

While they have yet to uncover archaeological evidence of Herod's decree to have the children murdered around Bethlehem, many argue that it's not outside of his character in his later years to pull such a move if he felt threatened.

While Herod Antipas, Herod the Great's son, protested the final version of his father's will wanting more territory nevertheless the emperor honored the final request. Rather than leaving the entirety of Judea to one of his children he split the area into 4 regions giving each to a different child. Herod inherited rule over Galilee and Perea.

This Herod also had a mean streak, though he was a muted version of his father. He is responsible for having John the Baptist beheaded after making a foolish promise to his daughter Salome. He was also superstitious thinking that the gossip talking about Jesus working miracles was actually John come back from the dead.

He refurbished towns and had a few grand building projects of his own. His politics were filled with intrigue but much less successful than his father's. Building the city Tiberias was a clear attempt to win favor from the emperor at the time. Ultimately his trying to win more territory for himself ended him in disfavor with the emperor and he was exiled where he eventually died, some say in Spain.

In the gospels his role is found solely in the gospel of Luke. Pontius Pilate sends Jesus to him for a ruling when Jesus is brought by the Jews before him. Jesus was from Herod's territory and this was clearly a Jewish matter so Pilate put it in the appropriate hands.

I think we can surmise that Pilate wanted nothing to do with the outcome of the matter meaning that Herod could have ruled in Jesus' favor and maybe even let Him go. We see that Herod was fascinated with Jesus' miracles and was excited to meet Him, likely expecting to see some wonders firsthand. Jesus thwarts any of this by essentially refusing to speak with Herod.

We know that Herod found Jesus innocent, yet sent Him back to Pilate rather than setting Him free. A possibly significant detail here is that while both Herods are linked to the Jews and may have even observed Jewish custom to some extent (Herod was likely nearby in Jerusalem because of the Passover) they were ethnically Arabic. This duality is a foundational illustration of the split allegiance of both Herods. They weren't all in with Jew or Gentile. Instead they played to both striving to keep peace in their domain. Herod the Great was much more successful than his son.

Calling either a hero or villain is difficult. Perhaps the first thing we can glean from these two men is that context and background are important whenever we're identifying anyone. Yes, Herod the Great did some nasty things. He was also a victim of deteriorating physical and mental health. Can we acknowledge that he did some good things, some terrible things, and have compassion on him because of fading faculties? I think we can.

How about Herod Antipas? He did some good work rebuilding and building his area of rule. He also wimped out when he had the chance to possibly pardon Jesus, painted himself into the corner leading to John the Baptist's execution, and had his own intemperate disposition. Can we acknowledge that he did some good things, some wicked things, and have compassion on him as we consider the role model he had in his father and what all transpired under that rule? I think we can.

So what can we learn other than recognizing that even the worst actors can be sympathetic players when we consider their circumstances and background? There is a lot, but as we have with other figures we'll dial in on a couple rather than be exhaustive.

Herod the Great shows us what happens when illness isn't treated properly. As mental illness progresses untreated there can be serious impact on how we view the world, treat one another, and behave. Typically wonderful people can take a turn for the mean, nasty, and unstable. Even untreated physical illness can have this kind of effect. All of us can only handle so much pain and distress before it affects how we deal with the world around us.

Caring for ourselves physically and mentally is a necessity as people of faith. We desire to do our utmost to live out life in a Godly, Christ centered way. There is already enough pulling at us to give in to urges to go a different path. Compounding it with illnesses that could otherwise be treated or even eliminated is foolishness.

Sadly there is still stigma around mental illness. There are those who simply don't believe it is relevant or exists. Speak with someone or a loved one of someone who struggles with mental illness and the education will be fast and very real.

Because of the stigma too many stay away from treatment out of fear of what others might think. Friends and family who watch their loved one begin to decline keep quiet out of fearing giving offense. When the illness is real, rarely does it improve on its own.

What might have happened differently if Herod had access to the treatment and understanding we have today around illness and disease? Would he have gone down the erratic, aggressive path he did or perhaps been a different ruler altogether? We'll never know for certain.

What we do know is that if we see signs in ourselves or others there is help available. Take it. Recommend it to others. Imagine the blessing and relief in realizing something that was taking you down a path of ungodly decisions against your own preferences were you clear of mind was stopped in its tracks. Treated. Maybe even cured. When we see decline prevented and stopped it is a miracle given by God that can save more than a life. It can save a soul.

From Herod Antipas we learn the value of being willing to stretch beyond our upbringing and developing the backbone to stand up for what is correct.

All of us have influences in our background that have pushed us the wrong direction. We've been enticed to sin by people in our lives. We've had wrong attitudes, hateful spirit, and condemning hearts demonstrated in ways that infiltrate our own sense of being and values. Somehow we can find a way to come to a redeemer like Christ who embodies the opposite of things we've been taught and find a way to lie our heads down at night peacefully reconciling unChristlike attitudes, words, and actions with claiming to follow the one who calls us to discard those same values.

It takes courage to step outside of those constraints. It risks losing friends and in some cases even being shunned by family. It risks being talked about and judged. It risks loss of status and a wounding of pride and ego. It's still worth it.

Herod Antipas might have had a longer and greater reign had he not given into his baser instincts, perhaps influenced by the disfunction in his father's reign and family relationships. Had he developed a better set of values and means of conducting his personal, public, and professional lives his response to

Jesus might have been different.

Though we understand that Jesus' end was inevitable it is a fair exercise to wonder what might have been had Herod been willing to render a verdict and sentencing consummate with what we are told he believed. He found Jesus innocent. Send him home a free man. Don't send him to a Pilate who would execute him out of expedience and convenience.

The name Herod in scripture is very laced with negativity. We can still take valuable lessons from these men.

Yes, some actions and attitudes are inexcusable. We can still find compassion for those who might commit them if we understand where they came from and what forged them into the person they have become.

Take care of our bodies and minds. Our ability to live most fully into our relationship with Christ may have everything to do with our willingness to find and accept help when physical and mental illness comes our way. Those skilled in treating and healing our minds and bodies are instruments of God.

Finally, be our own person. Be your own person. I need to be my own person. Grow beyond what has been pushed on us searching out what is true, real, and good. Live into that, especially in matters of faith. You've heard me say it often. Just because we've been told something doesn't make it correct.

Most of the people we revere in scripture have done all three of these in some form or fashion. They have found grace even for those who have come against them. They have owned their own brokenness and sought healing. They have reckoned with their misunderstandings of God, found truth, and pursued it often at great sacrifice and cost to their own lives.

Perhaps the best way to sum up these lessons from the Herods is this. Know that we all are weak and have weaknesses. When we look at them squarely and own them, we can overcome them and find a greater peace and more fulfilled life. When we overcome them as a course of faith and pursuit of Jesus, we become mightier instruments of God to transform the world.