

Herod's Harassment of the Church

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for the Sunday, March the 16th. My name is Kent Dixon, and it is my joy to be the pastor here. And yes, tomorrow is St. Patrick's Day. And I promise I won't preach like this all morning, but I might start that way.

No, I won't. This morning, we're continuing in our ongoing sermon series, Acts to All the World. And this is one I was looking forward to. Through this series, we are exploring the New Testament book of Acts.

And our focus passage this morning... Oh, that's what I wanted to talk about. I put the slide in the wrong spot. So, what's baptism? Do you know what baptism is?

Well, fortunately, I can edit this out later, so I will. But I've had conversations with people who want to be baptized, who want to follow the Lord in that step, in their faith journey.

And so, as I have these conversations, I'm a plate spinner. So, I'm spinning a plate here, and I'm spinning a plate here. And now I come to you on Sunday morning and say, I'm talking to people about baptism, which means we will be having a baptism service.

[1 : 08] Which means this is a perfect opportunity if you were here this morning, or you happen to be listening to the sermon later, and you hear me say this, are you thinking about it?

Are you curious about it? Do you want to know more about baptism? If you have not been baptized, and you feel God calling you in this step, in your faith journey, talk to me about it, because the time is now.

Maybe now. And here's a window for you to explore that with me, and to talk about it in greater detail. So, baptism. Think about it. Our focus passage this morning is found in Acts 12, verses 1 to 25.

A little bit longer section, so open your Bible, Acts 12, 1 to 25, and I'll read it for us as well. It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.

He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the festival of unleavened bread.

[2 : 19] After arresting him, he put him into prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

So, Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.

Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. Quick, get up, he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

Then the angel said to him, Put on your clothes and sandals, and Peter did so. Wrap your cloak around you and follow me, the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea what the angel was doing was really happening.

He thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

[3 : 28] Then Peter came to himself and said, Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a

servant named Rhoda came to answer the door.

When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed, she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, Peter's at the door. You're out of your mind, they told her.

When she kept insisting it was so, they said, It must be his angel. But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison.

Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this, he said, and then he left for another place. In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. [4 : 35] After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.

He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon. They now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

On the appointed day, Herod, wearing his royal robe, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, This is the voice of a god, not of a man.

Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark. Elvis Presley. That got your attention.

[5 : 43] William Shakespeare. Abraham Lincoln. John A. MacDonald. Rosa Parks. Billy Graham. Alexander Fleming.

And hopefully, for anyone who calls themselves a follower or disciple, Jesus Christ. Throughout history, there are names that are familiar, that are recognizable to us, and that are also famous to some extent or another.

people whose names are important. They remind us of who they are or were or what they have done. But what about infamous ones?

And that doesn't mean not familiar in some way, but people who are known for their disgraceful, their criminal, or even evil actions.

Emperor Nero. Adolf Hitler. Saddam Hussein. Osama Bin Laden. Idi Amin.

[6 : 51] Joseph Stalin. Ayatollah Khomeini. Kim Jong-un. Maybe others even come to mind for you. It's curious to me, when I consider this, that these infamous individuals, who we would, lots of them, most of them, we would consider to be actually evil, are all, have you thought about this?

Or did you notice? They're all political figures. They're dictators. And even terrorists. And I think that speaks directly to the ability for power and influence to corrupt the human heart and human motives.

Is that fair? There are also lots of examples of infamous or evil people in the Bible too. But there's one name that keeps coming up and causing problems over and over in God's story.

And that is Herod. You may know this, but there was actually more than one infamous ruler named Herod. And we're going to consider this morning that and some other things.

And our sermon is titled Herod's Harassment of the Church. As I mentioned, I was going to preach the sermon last Sunday. That was the intention. Then Tuesday night, our first episode of season four of The Chosen features a Herod.

[8 : 18] So I thought, talk about Herod Sunday, talk about Herod again. So now we flipped it. So we're talking, talked about Herod on Tuesday night at The Chosen. And now I'm unpacking a bit of detail.

So you'll remember that after Saul's conversion, the persecution against the early church kind of dropped off a bit, right? In Acts 9 verse 3, we learned that the churches in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee had peace, essentially.

And in Acts 11, 19 to 21, we learned that the gospel had spread as far as the city of Antioch in Syria. So it was a positive time for the early church, but sometimes trouble comes when we least expect it, doesn't it?

A new time of persecution came against the church in Jerusalem under one of those Herods. So which Herod? This is helpful, I think, I hope.

So we heard this morning that in Acts 12 verse 1, a king Herod started to cause trouble for the church, and this man was Herod Agrippa I.

[9 : 28] That's his name. So this Herod, stay with me, I'll go slow, this Herod was the grandson of Herod the Great. Herod the Great was the Herod who massacred babies in an attempt to stop the baby born in Bethlehem.

This Herod that we're talking about this morning was the nephew of Herod Antipas. That was the Herod who beheaded John the Baptist and brought Jesus to trial.

This Herod that we're talking about this morning was the father of Herod Agrippa II. His son got the second but the same name. That was the Herod who tried the apostle Paul.

And we're going to learn that in the weeks ahead. So this is a long line of nefarious rulers named Herod. Have you ever thought about that in scripture?

I think we hear the name and we think that can't be the same guy, it's a different time in history. So it's not a name though, this name, Herod, it's not one I would suggest naming a son.

[10 : 36] Right? Is that fair? There's some negative connotations here, right? And it wasn't like there was one great Herod and all the rest were bad guys. They all seem to have been bad guys, certainly in terms of God's people and God's story.

So we can learn from how God and the church responded to the persecution of this Herod. And we're going to dig a bit deeper into that more together.

So the first terrible act we learn about this Herod is that he had, as scripture tells us there, James, the brother of John, put to death by the sword.

Herod kills James. Remember who James is? Let's think about it again. So Herod kills James, the brother of John, so here's a bit of a refresher on James.

James was the son of a man named Zebedee, and he had two sons, as we learn in scripture. We learn in Mark 1, 19 and 20, that James was one of Jesus' first disciples, one of the first 12.

[11 : 44] Together with his brother John, Jesus named them the sons of thunder, James and John, because of their strong personalities. They were fiery. They were intense.

And it's pointed out to us over and over in the book of Mark that James and John were part of Jesus' inner circle, part of his closest disciples. It's interesting that, not counting Judas Iscariot, who died before the church actually began, James was the first apostle to die.

When James and John came to Jesus to ask him to grant their request to be seated in a place of honor, remember that in scripture? They said, Lord, we want to be seated at your right and left side. We want the places of honor in your kingdom, in your ministry. Jesus foretold that they would suffer the same fate that he would himself.

So Herod executing James was not outside of the realm of possibility, right? They were not ideally going to land in a good place. And you may or may not know this, but after his death, James was not replaced by another person who would serve as an apostle.

[12 : 59] So James was not replaced. And in fact, aside from Judas, who was replaced after his death, there's no indication in scripture that any of the apostles were replaced when they died.

And you probably know they died. So as is the case with many leaders and rulers, especially the corrupt and evil ones, Herod was thrilled by the positive reaction he got from the unbelieving Jewish people.

Corrupt rulers tend to get pretty gleeful when they do something and everybody reacts. So you may remember, I've mentioned him a few times over the past few weeks, the Jewish historian and military leader Josephus.

Remember that name? You probably remember he talked about the city of Antioch. Josephus also said that this Herod was most, the most likely, or sorry, the most liked by the Jewish people of any of the Herods.

And now I'm not talking about Jewish believers, I'm talking about the Jewish people as a whole. So they liked this Herod and possibly the most out of all of them. So I guess that maybe makes him the best of the worst.

[14 : 18] It's likely Herod enjoyed this attention though, right? He likes stirring people up. So then to keep their attention and favor on himself, what does he do?

Herod imprisons Peter. Imprisoned by a king. So as we read in our passage this morning, based on the reaction of the unbelieving, remember, Jewish people to his killing of James, Herod arrested Peter during the days of unleavened bread, scripture tells us there.

Then he delayed his trial, planning to hold it after Passover, which is probably a smart move, right? Peter was kept locked up and guarded by, scripture tells us, four squads of soldiers.

You know me, you know I like numbers, you know I like to know, what does that mean? Well, that would have been roughly 16 men. One prisoner, 16 guards.

Likely, no, they weren't all there at one time. Some of them needed coffee breaks. So they were likely taking shifts, but that's a lot of soldiers to assign to one prisoner.

[15:28] So while Peter was in prison, we read that the church responded with constant, scripture says, fervent prayer for the situation. And that's a much better response than just wringing their hands, right?

Worrying about it. Oh, poor Peter, what are we going to do? How about, dear God, protect Peter. Dear God, deliver Peter. Peter was chained up, we read, and sleeping between two soldiers.

And then two others were guarding the door to his cell. So there's four. So maybe that's four shifts of four, maybe? So we read that an angel appeared and lit up the room.

Angels lit up the sky when Jesus was born. So they lit up this room, literally lit it up. One angel. He came and told Peter to get up and get dressed.

And it says he poked him, right? He nudged him. It's kind of funny. Honey, don't poke. Oh, oh, it's an angel. Oh my. It'd be a shocker, wouldn't it?

[16:31] To be woken up out of a dead sleep by an angel. So he tells them, the angel does, tells Peter to get up and get dressed. And his shackles come off.

They fall to the ground. Then the angel leads him out of his cell and right past the guards. Angels have that ability, right, to take you where you don't expect to be going.

And Peter was so dumbfounded by what was happening that he thought he was dreaming it, right? He thought he was having a vision because it was just too much for him to believe.

He couldn't wrap his head around what was going on. So ultimately, Peter realizes that it wasn't a vision and that God had in fact delivered him out of that situation.

I love this next part. Peter heads to the house of Mary, the mother of John, also known as Mark, where people have been gathered to pray for him. Peter knocks on the door. This servant, Rhoda, is so surprised and overjoyed to hear Peter's voice that she doesn't answer the door.

[17:35] She runs to tell everyone and forgets to open the door. Peter's like, hello, hello, it's Peter, hello.

Everyone hears what she says, we read, right? They think she must be crazy. There's no way. So, they're praying, there's a dichotomy there. They're praying for Peter, they're praying for him to be delivered, be protected, likely, but could he show up?

Nah, that's a little far. We can't, we can't buy that. So, they think she's crazy and they come back to open the door, answer the door for themselves. When the door is finally open, they see Peter, he's a little annoyed probably, and everyone, scripture says, is astonished.

No kidding. He was locked up, right? Peter settles everyone down, okay, just be quiet, sit down, before he explains what happened.

He instructs them to spread word to James, Jesus' brother, and the other disciples that he is free again. Pass this along, pass it on, I'm out.

[18:45] And then, it's interesting, because scripture says, as it, so often, there's scripture accounts where it's like, something's happening, and then, right turn, different direction.

Because, scripture says that this all happens, Peter's the center of the story, and then Peter heads off to another place, scripture says. Poof, Peter is gone. He's on to a different task.

So, he exits the story at that point. And it's interesting that for some reason, God's plan involved James dying, but Peter surviving, Peter lived.

And as you may know, Peter would later die for Jesus. That would come, as would most of the apostles. But for Herod, God wasn't quite done with him just yet.

So, let's see what happens next. It seems like it wasn't until the next morning before a full realization came that Peter was gone.

[19:50] Needless to say, that would cause a bit of a commotion, right? Herod ordered a thorough search for Peter without any luck. No sign of him. He's gone.

Herod questions the guards himself. How often does a ruler do that? Probably almost never. So, you're in big trouble if you're one of these 16 guys standing in front of the king.

Because he's saying, you lost him, someone's going to pay for it. Well, they have no answer, so who pays for it? All of them. Ultimately, he orders them to be executed.

Talk about failing a performance review, right? So, Herod leaves Judea and heads for Caesarea. And Caesarea, if you remember, maybe you don't, it's the seat of Roman government at the time. So, Herod is leaving this Jewish province and heading for one of the seats of Roman government. We learn that there's been a conflict of some kind between the people of Tyre and Sidon and Herod.

[20 : 57] So, there's no detail given there about what the conflict is. But these people managed to plead their case to Herod's servant, Blastus, is his name. And they're hoping to get Herod to show some lenience because Scripture tells us they relied on Herod's country for food.

So, they're pretty desperate, right? They need to keep that resource flowing. And at a public audience, Herod gave, the people, we see, we read, they praised him.

They appealed to his vanity in the hopes of, what? Receiving his favor. Have you ever had someone appeal to your vanity? Stroke your ego a little bit?

Sometimes it feels good. Are you ever in that moment, though, able to stop and say, what are they after? Right? This wasn't just these people liked Herod.

I mean, they did, we read, right? But at the same time, they know this is a vain man. This is a man who likes attention, he likes praise, and so if you want something from him, make him feel good about himself.

[22 : 09] But then we learned quickly there that because Herod didn't give praise to God in this situation, an angel of the Lord immediately struck Herod down and he died.

Our God really doesn't seem to like arrogant, prideful rulers, does he, throughout Scripture? Ask King Saul. Ask King Ahaz.

Ask Pharaoh. You may remember that Luke, the author of Acts, was a physician, he was a doctor. And he tells his readers that Herod was eaten by worms and he died.

Gross, right? So our ancient historian friend Josephus, here he is again, wrote that a severe pain arose in Herod's belly.

So this is a historical account. And it became so violent that he was carried into his palace where he died five days later. A doctor named A. Rendell Short, he was a professor of surgery at Bristol University.

[23 : 18] He wrote a book titled The Bible and Modern Medicine. I do not have a copy. I want to get one. Short stated that a great many people in Asia harbor intestinal worms.

Gross. Gross. Which can form a tight ball, gross, and cause something called acute intestinal obstruction.

Ouch. So this may have in fact been the cause of Herod's death. But, let's be perfectly clear, this isn't in any way to suggest that it wasn't an angel that struck Herod down at God's command.

Or to suggest that what happened wasn't miraculous in some way, right? It's just explaining how it happened and what might have happened. Doesn't mean God didn't do it.

God allowed Herod to rule for a time. Allowed him to persecute his church. But only for a time. With the death of Herod and the end of his harassment against the church, as we read, the word of God grew and multiplied.

[24 : 31] Paul and Silas would later be able to complete their ministry and return to Antioch with John Mark as we hear at the end of the passage from this morning. So, what can we learn from this?

How can the church react to and stand against persecution? Any thoughts? It's on the screen.

Thank you. We can learn how God is able to humble governmental authorities who resist him.

Rather than worry about who's in control, who's in power, who has influence, right now, it is only my brothers and sisters for a time.

Rulers and even entire nations may stand against our God and scripture is full of those stories. But the Lamb will triumph over them because he alone is king of kings and lord of lords.

Whether through divine intervention, God's stepping into the affairs of humanity, which he does, or through divine providence, God's care and direction for and over all things in the universe.

[25 : 54] Jesus as king of kings and lord of lords is in ultimate control. As his disciples, we must trust him, even if in his wisdom it means some may be martyrs while others go free.

Even if it means that corrupt and evil leaders may rule only for a time. God remains in control. My friends, do not fear.
Trust in God alone. Amen.