

Mark 6:1-29

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 00] Well, good evening, everyone. It's really nice to see you all. If you are new or newish, my name is Aaron. I'm one of the ministers here at St. John's. I'd love to meet you. Come and say hi afterwards.

We are slowly working our way through the gospel of Mark, and we're in Mark chapter six, and we're going to get straight into it. So the first half of chapter six is all about the first mission of the disciples.

So Jesus has called his team, and this first half of chapter six, he sends them out, and they come back again, out, back in again. But right in the middle of that first mission, Mark inserts the story of the martyrdom of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod.

And remember, Mark is a very clever writer. He does this for a reason, and he does this to force us as readers to consider the cost of discipleship.

Mission is hard. There's going to be problems. Even Jesus was rejected in his hometown. Now, I want you to hold that thought. Again, most likely, I think, the big point of this first half of chapter six is something along the lines of discipleship and mission is difficult.

[1 : 14] It's costly. It's hard. However, I do want to point out this Herod story. Because Mark is normally very concise, and he moves his stories along quite quickly.

But here, a lot of attention is given to this guy, Herod. Mark has obviously got something for us in this particular little insert. So I'm going to preach just on that little insert there, on this guy, Herod, because we just get a lot of real estate in a gospel that's normally really concise.

So we're looking at verses 14 to 29. So let's begin by orienting ourselves, okay? So Herod was the ruler of Judea.

This Herod, in Mark 6, was the son of the Herod who wanted to kill Jesus way back early in the gospel, and Matthew 2 talks about it.

So he was part of this kind of family dynasty who ruled for big chunks of time. So think like the Trudeaus or the Kennedys or the Bushes or something like that.

[2 : 22] And he had quite a privileged life. I mean, his world was all about power. He had lots of it. He could just, you know, he could indulge himself. He could do whatever he wanted.

For example, whilst on holiday with his in-laws, and we know this from third-party historians, whilst on holiday with his in-laws, he decided he liked the look of his brother's wife.

So he got rid of his own wife and took her. And her name was Herodias. Herodias. And this will be confusing. But Herodias was also Herod's niece, which meant that she was previously married.

Since she was previously married to Herod's brother, her first two marriages were to her uncles.

And to complicate it even more, Herodias had a child with her first uncle-husband.

And they had a daughter called Salome, who went on to marry Herod's half-brother. So I know, it's very confusing. Don't try and wrap your head around the family tree, because it's not really a family tree.

[3 : 32] It's more like a hedge, where the branches go out, only so far, and then they kind of pop back in again. Anyway, all that to say, it's a weird, powerful, violent family.

And Herod is the top dog. He rules over all of them. And despite the unseemliness of this family arrangement, this sort of incestuous, adulterous arrangement, I mean, no one would be crazy enough to kind of say anything to Herod.

Except John the Baptist. This is not a guy who would read the polls before speaking. And we see this in verse 18. He says this. John had been saying to Herod, it's not lawful.

It's not lawful what you're doing. It's not lawful to take your brother's wife. He had the guts to say, what you're doing is wrong. A very brave thing to do. And a very costly thing to do. Now, Herod's

new wife, Herodias, didn't seem to view herself as a victim in this situation.

She did not like what John was saying. It seemed she rather enjoyed being married to a king. And she wanted John shut down permanently. Verse 19 says this.

[4 : 50] Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted him put to death. Now, to somewhat placate her, Herod imprisoned John, but didn't kill him, which is so interesting, isn't it?

Why didn't he kill him? Because Herod was fascinated by John. And this is so interesting. Listen to verse 20 again. Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe.

When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. Isn't that a bizarre situation? It seems that Herod would sneak down to the dungeons and listen to John preach at him. And he loved his preaching. But it says he was perplexed by it as well. And that perplexed word literally means he was divided by it.

It divided him. And I think we can safely guess why he was divided by John's words. Because on the one hand, he's listening to the words of God through John, and John would be calling him to repent, telling him that God's Messiah is coming and the world won't be the same, telling him to seek forgiveness, which is a wonderful thing to hear, telling him to live in God's world, God's way, all great stuff.

[6 : 13] And Herod would have felt his conscience tugged, and perhaps he could begin to imagine a different way of living opening up to him. But on the other hand, he's thinking, I've got a great life.

I've got a really good gig. Why would I want to mess with that? So he's got these two things going on inside him. He's a divided man.

He's got the gospel pulling him in one direction, and his desire to maintain power pulling him in the other. And it would appear that that was just the state of play for a long time.

He just kept going down, listening to John, but not really doing anything about what John was saying. And at the risk of using a cliché, it was like Herod was at his crossroads, and he had the opportunity to change his life, to follow John's call, but he didn't do it.

It's like imagine he's sitting in a car, and he just puts on the emergency brake, not making any decision about what he's hearing, until a decision was made for him.

[7 : 23] Let's pause here for a moment. Why do we think Mark slows his narrative right down to tell us about Herod? As I said at the start, it's got something to do with the idea that mission is hard, and here's a story about powerful people oppressing the gospel messengers, but there's more going on here.

We hear about Herod's predicament because it's a common one. Here's a guy who's living as he pleases, his worldview is maximize pleasure.

I just want to maximize my pleasure, maximize my sensuality, my power, just maximize it all. Why not? It's working for him.

And then along comes John the Baptist, who seems to be living for something else. John is this, Herod can't get his head around, John is living, has given his life over to something else completely, a greater purpose, a higher purpose, and Herod can't wrap his head around it.

His whole worldview is being rocked here. The Word of God comes into Herod's life. It shakes his foundation, and he wants to hear more, but he's also really conflicted.

[8 : 43] So he's living in this really weird space of hearing God's Word, but just spinning his wheels when it comes to actually doing anything about it.

And what does this mean for us? Well, I just think we can do this too. The Word of God can come into our life. You know, sometimes, if you're like me, you might read something in the Word. You might read something from a Christian book.

You might hear a sermon, or somebody says something really godly and Christian to you, and it comes into your life, and it shakes you up, but like Herod, your worldview has great difficulty incorporating it.

Perhaps it's a word about sin, or sexuality, or money, or whatever it is, something controversial, and it'll come to you, and you just can't work out where to put that in your brain, because it's not how you've been taught to think about a certain thing.

It bumps up hard against your, you know, sort of culturally assembled values, so to speak. So what do we do when this happens?

[9 : 49] Folks, don't do what Herod did. Don't wait. Don't wait to act on God's Word, because Herod had this chance to change his life.

And he's stalled on processing. It's just processing, processing, processing, processing. He had the chance to change his life. But eventually, that choice to act was taken from him by Herodias.

And as a result, something in Herod changes. Something happens to his heart after that. And I'll tell you why we know that. What we're reading about right now is something happening really early on in Jesus' ministry.

I want you to remind you now of something that happens right at the end of Jesus' ministry. When Herod finally meets Jesus, this Jesus that John had told him about later in the Gospels.

In Luke 23, Jesus has been arrested. You know these stories. He's brought before the authorities. And let me read a little section to you here from Luke 23. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad.

[11 : 00] He'd long desired to see him. He'd heard about him. He was hoping to see some sign. He wanted to be sort of entertained by Jesus. So he questioned him at length. But Jesus made no answer.

The chief priests and the scribes stood by vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Between the death of John the Baptist and the arrest of Jesus, Herod's heart had become stone.

And Jesus saw his heart and wouldn't even speak to him. Wouldn't even talk to him. It's a very, it's a very chilling story. Folks, when God speaks to us, we move on it.

We move on it. If God has spoken to you like John spoke to Herod, don't waver. Don't spin your wheels. Don't put off the action. Move on it. Because at some point, it seems, this is the story of Herod, at some point, if we keep pushing God away, our hearts can become rigid.

They can become incapable of responding as they should. Something changed in Herod. Seems to have happened after he made this stupid, drunken promise.

[12 : 16] So let's have a look at that in our story and then we'll finish up. So we're at verse 21 now. Verse 21. So here's the scene. So, you know, so Herod's the head of state.

He has to throw parties to keep important people happy. You know how it works. It's his birthday. He throws a big party. It's a very indulgent affair. So he gets his wife's daughter.

I don't know what she is to him. You know, like stepdaughter, great niece, something. To dance for him and his friends. And folks, if you've seen the movie *Pride and Prejudice*, you know the dancing scene in that?

It's great, right? That is not what we're talking about here. This is not a tap dance. In the Greek, the dance is, it's a saucy dance.

Herod is probably a bit drunk at this point. He loves, he loves the dance. He loves it. Like it's just awful and grimy, isn't it? But he loves it. He wants to reward Salome.

[13 : 25] And in a show of, show of sort of power and stupidity, he sort of says, whatever you want, whatever you want, I'll give to you. It's all, whatever you want. His mates are slapping on the back.

You're the man, you're amazing. But it all goes a bit sideways because Herodias, at that point, sees her chance. And she gets the girl to ask for John's head on a platter.

And it's so tragically ironic, isn't it? Because compared to Herod, she's really decisive. She knows exactly what she wants. So now Herod has to make a decision.

And despite his love of John's teaching, his heart is captivated by power. You know, his great fear is losing face in front of powerful people. So he acts against his conscience and murders this innocent man.

The whole thing is such a tragedy, isn't it? Herod liked the preacher, but he really liked popularity. And he really liked power.

[14 : 22] Really liked sex. And he really liked doing whatever he wanted. And many people have rejected Jesus on these, you know, because of these things. And many Christians have rejected aspects of Christ's teaching because of these things.

Many Christians, we refuse to act on God's word because we just love power more. We love sex more. We love popularity more. So what do we do? What do we do?

What do we do when we feel like this? What do we do when we have Herod's choice before us?

When you feel the pull, when you know you should be Christ's ambassador at your schools, at your work, but you really like popularity in our lives and you don't want to be the weird person and you

don't want to be controversial.

What do you do? Well, there's lots of things you can do. Can I just suggest one thing? Just one thing I'll suggest. Pray Psalm 139. Pray this for yourself. Pray this for the folks in your life who don't know Jesus because they have these huge barriers between them and Jesus.

Pray 139 verse 23. Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts and see if there's any grievous way in me and lead me to the way everlasting.

[15:37] Ask God to change our divided hearts. Let me sort of attempt a summary here. I have heard that, and I may have mentioned this before, that, so J.R., you know, Tolkien, who wrote The Lord of the Rings, when he would re-read the book, apparently there was only one point that would bring him to tears in the book.

And it's the scene where Sam and Frodo are sleeping and Gollum is going to lead them into the giant spider's lair, lead them to their death. But then right before this, something happens in Gollum and he looks at Frodo and Frodo has been really kind to him.

You know this scene probably. Frodo's been so kind to him. And Gollum's heart starts to soften and he starts to think, I can't do this. And he looks at sleeping Frodo and he reaches out and he touches Frodo's hand.

And at that point, unfortunately, Sam wakes up, sees Gollum reaching out to Frodo and screams at him, what are you doing? Get away from him.

And Gollum uses that as an excuse to return to his original plan to get them killed. It's a tragic moment in the book. So it's apparently the only scene that Tolkien would tear up on.

[16:50] Because it's a moment in the book where you have this divided heart that has these two paths before them and they choose wrong. And as a result, a heart gets a lot harder.

Friends, perhaps your heart is divided. I think all our hearts are probably divided, aren't they?

Perhaps it's divided on mission. Perhaps you are playing games with sin. Folks, Herod shows us you can't keep pushing God away in areas of your life with no effect.

It is naive to think you can keep pushing God away in specific areas of your life and think that there will be no consequences to that, to your soul, to your heart.

It is foolish to play games with sin and think, it's foolish to think this, it's foolish to think you can suppress your conscience in some area of your life and then think you can just awaken it up later on.

It doesn't always work like that. Folks don't live like that. This is a cautionary tale for us. Sometimes we run out of time. Sometimes our hearts become so seared, you know, like a steak, it becomes so seared that the hardness is locked in.

[18:02] And I know some of you are thinking, this is really heavy. Aaron, I liked your other sermons better. It just seems to me the story of Herod is a warning to us.

It's about the death of a conscience. A conscience that was stirred for a while and even started to perhaps come alive.

And then it died. And it died because this man failed to act courageously when he feared what others would think of him. Now I think the primary message here is for non-believers, but not just non-believers, it's for us.

If we neglect acting on God's word, we can become progressively desensitized to it. And when that happens, you know, we're still saved, but the joys of the gospel fade.

Jesus offers us forgiveness and friendship and guidance and gives us a mission and a purpose that's so much greater than ourselves. And these great treasures can just, you know, not shine so much as they should in our hearts.

[19:14] So when God knocks on your door, a strong word comes to you that bumps up against your values. Folks, don't spin your wheels.

Don't live the divided life. When God speaks, act on it. When it comes to mission, act on it. When it comes to sin, conviction comes into your heart, act on it.

When it comes to forgiveness, the promise of forgiveness, believe it. Amen.