

The Dancing Girl

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[0 : 00] This is a typical Harry assignment to me. He's supposed to do this, but he has to get out of town today.

So he asked me, and I have a couple of hours to... He's been talking all week or all month about the Lamb of God and the coming of Christ, and now next week he gets the Christmas season, and he has me doing the Dancing Girl.

Maybe, I don't know. It's a fascinating story. I may interact with you a bit. I may ask you to do some of this study yourself by interacting with each other, but let me lay some groundwork. Sixteen verses out of all of Mark are dealt with John the Baptist's death.

Only three have to do with his ministry, and somehow there's some lessons in there for us today. Herod's court is the center of power in Jerusalem, representing Rome in Judea, which is, as you know, full of Jews.

Herod has married his brothers, who has died, but he's a half-Jew, and he's married his brother's wife, which makes him, to the Jews, an adulteress. And by the time you unpack this, there's enough intrigue in the palace, probably to be a series of the lives of the young and restless.

[1 : 10] There's a prophet named John who has his opinion of both the morals of society as well as what's happening in the palace. And the birthday party, which starts out innocent enough, becomes a place where you find lechery and treachery and murder.

Now, John the Baptist is an honest and righteous and holy man. He has told the truth about Christ's coming, and he has told the truth about what he thinks of what Herod has done in the immorality of marrying the brother's wife.

And the crowd loves him, and of course, the people in society are threatened by him, and they don't like him. Now, the guests of the party in the text, it says, are the elite of Judea, the lords, the high captains, and the chiefs of men of Galilee.

Now, some of us would even be invited there. I can think of a few. If you want to know whether you'd be invited, come see me afterwards. I'll let you know whether you would have made the list. But the point is, it's the who's who. Vancouver Magazine is there.

The privileged, the fortunate few are there. Tickle pink to be invited to Herod's birthday. And then King Herod is the Tetrarch of Galilee, the guest of honor, and Herodias, his wife, and Salome, who's named in other accounts of Scripture, is the daughter.

[2 : 20] Most probably a teenager, which, stay tuned, if you don't think teenagers can get themselves in trouble. They can. Now, the text is very clear. Herod is married to Herodias and probably finds Herodias' daughter desirable.

He knows Herodias is afraid. He doesn't like John. And so Herod finds himself afraid of everyone. He's afraid of John because he's a holy man. He's afraid of his wife because she wants to kill John. He doesn't want to upset his wife. And he's afraid of the population that John was inciting almost to riot because of what John was saying. So Herod's a confused man, trapped by his own awareness of his sin and his need for God.

Thus, he listens to John, often even when he is in jail. And yet, John threatens his very marriage, his lifestyle, and his power. Now, there's an irony in the fact that this unscrupulous king, who's committed adultery, overtaxes the people, lies to everybody, decides to protect his honor all of a sudden, out of the blue, by killing the very one person who has offered Herod any kind of hope and has offered Herod any kind of peace.

And so he tends, at this point, to, because of some dancing girl, to kill someone very beautiful and very righteous. And what Mark is doing in the Gospel of Mark here is he's laying a precursor.

[3 : 34] He's giving you the other passion story in Mark. The next passion story is going to be on Christ. And you have a crowd there. And you're going to have a king there. And you're going to have intrigue there. And you're going to have treachery there with Judas.

It's all there, again, in a few chapters. But that time, it's going to be Jesus. And here, it's going to be John the Baptist. I think it's a little easier for us to understand with John the Baptist.

Now, Herodias is an angry woman. Or housewife, use the play. She wants to kill John. She masterminds the plot that will take care of him. And she even doesn't, he does it at the expense of having her daughter dance a very immoral, lascivious dance.

And her husband's emotional health, he becomes, it says, exceedingly sorry. She doesn't matter who she steps on, who she hurts, or who she manipulates or misuses. She's going to get the deed done and take on this person who threatens her own evilness.

And isn't that exactly what we do? If something or some person threatens our evil deed, our desire to do evil, things we want to do, we'll go at no length, no length to overcome it and do away with it.

[4 : 39] And like Sosnitsyn said of Russia years ago, the big lie, we tend to tell more and more of a lie to protect the lie. You know, you heard the joke they're telling at Regent College about that Adam and Eve are certainly, they're proven to be Russians.

Did you hear that? Well, there's three reasons, three telltale signs. Number one, they didn't have any clothes on. And secondly, all they had for sustenance was an apple. And thirdly, people in charge kept telling them they were in paradise.

Anyway, the point is, is that the lie, and there's a bigger lie, and there's a bigger lie, and it continues. You can use that joke, just don't quote me behind it. Now you have Salome, who seems at first innocent as an accomplice, but she's caught up in this atmosphere, the provocative dance to an all-male party.

There are no women. It says Herodias is off at the sideline. She has to go out of the room to ask her mother what she should do. And she adds a little bit of a macabre twist to it all, by not only asking for John's head, but she wants it on the platter, and she wants it now, and she wants everybody to see it.

So you can't really see her as an innocent teenager. I haven't met an innocent teenager the last 10 or 15 years, actually. And then you have the guests, who are certainly watching these events with mixed feelings of intrigue and horror.

[5 : 56] Yet it was their quiet pressure on Herod to save his honor by giving the dancing girl what she wanted. They were not, in one sense, innocent bystanders.

And what happens here? What happens is a man, a great man of God, who everybody loved, who was righteous, who was holy, who was honest, who had everyone's affection, gets killed, gets murdered over an incident with a dancing girl.

That just is insane. It should strike you as a bit insane. What's happened? And everybody has an excuse. Just like everybody has an excuse when Christ dies.

I couldn't help myself. You know, da-da-da. You know, Herod, I don't want to do it. I'm going to keep you safe in prison. Pontius Pilate, I don't want to do it. I wash my hands of this matter. The crowd, kill him, let him live.

The crowd sends mixed signals. Everybody, it's just like when Christ comes. Now, I think there's some major themes here. I should draw a picture. I won't have any credibility. Okay, here we go.

[7 : 00] Here's the banqueting hall. Here's the chair. Where, Harry, where are you when I need you? Here's the king. And here's the dancing girl.

Oh, boy. One comment, and you're up here drawing. And here's the crowds. You know, they're all around here, and they're all around here. And over here, hidden is Herodias.

And so they're all here. Now, what's the issue? Well, let me tell you first. To the Jews, if you go back to your text, the first thing it says, as they hear about Jesus, is that poor Herod says it must be that this person, John, who he's beheaded, has risen from the dead.

Now, why would Herod, probably a pagan believer, though he's half Jew, think that the resurrection occurred? Because to the Jews, the resurrection was the prelude to judgment.

If something was raised from the dead, if there was true resurrection, then there would be judgment. And there is this thread of the resurrection woven throughout this text. And if John has indeed risen from the dead, then Herod is in deep yogurt.

[8 : 11] Morally, politically, maritally, personally. And he's more right than he knows. Now, because the difference, you see, between John's disciples and Jesus' disciples is that when John dies, John's disciples take this headless person to some ground or some tomb, lay them in there, and they're defeated, they're depressed, they're despairing, and they disappear.

Some of them go with Jesus. That's all. That's all. And it looks at this point like evil has triumphed. And how many times have you and I in the city seen preliminarily like evil has triumphed?

David in the Psalms looks out at society and says, How come the unscrupulous wicked man prospers? And I follow you and I get nothing. I go nowhere.

And it looks for a second like evil triumphs. Seems okay. John is dead and buried. The marriage of Herod and Herodias stays intact. And the guests have a wild party. And Rome continues to rule Judea.

But the single difference of the text that lays the groundwork to absolutely envelop everyone is the coming of Jesus Christ. And he's here to stay.

[9 : 24] No power can contain him. Death he can defeat in a few days. And his resurrection is indeed judgment on them all. And you see, Jesus and his resurrection are still known, talked about, and increasingly followed 2,000 years later.

And the rest of the guests, all the lords and ladies and the high mucky mucks and the king Tektark and everything else, are forgotten. Maybe a few names on footnotes in thick books in the library on history.

Now, there's the difference. That somehow, this was where it's at. When you, you know, it's like being summoned to where it's at in Vancouver, only to be found upon a reflection.

It's not only sick, it's not even where it's at, ultimately. Because where it's at isn't even in the room. John the Baptist was pointing to where the real truth was. So the question, bringing home a bit more, is if we're today confused, like Herod.

We have a love-hate relationship with Christ. We know it's true, but we want to have our cake and eat it too. We want to dabble. We want to have a syncretistic faith. We want to be a little religious, and we want to be a little earthy.

[10 : 33] We want to be a little honest, but we want to be very tactful and skilled when we have to in our professions. In other words, we want kind of the respect of the church, and we want the respect of society, and you're going to fall between two stools, and you're not going to make it.

Because the confusion, ultimately, the desire to be loved and liked by society, or successful, or to obtain your end of money, sex, or power, which our psychologist is telling us, driving us every day, ultimately, that desire, like it was with Herod, will begin to decrease your focus on Jesus Christ.

And it will be to your own peril, as it was Herod's. So it's not going to be a horse race, because, as Isaiah says, the heart is deceptively wicked. Who can know it?

It seems to me that, ultimately, our innate nature, it is my nature, though I will shock very few of you. It's my nature that, if you give me the opportunity of following Christ, and the heady stuff of what the world seduces me by, often I pick the heady stuff.

So, you can be confused like Herod. Or, you might be intent, like Herodias, on an issue that you know that you're deceitful on, or you're knowing you're dishonest in, or you know some issue where evil has the upper hand.

[11 : 47] And so, the lie begins, and you'll do anything. You'll do anything. You'll cut any corner to get it done. I can't tell you, over years, last 20 years in the ministry, how many people walk in, and they just begin to rationalize what they've done.

They know it's wrong, but they're rationalized. And they may not be five years old, rationalizing, like my kids do brilliantly, extemporaneously, on why they committed some act, like stealing this, a cookie, or whatever. But, as adults, we're just even more savvy about how we rationalize what we've done, and how we have to take care of that which threatens us.

Because Jesus turns the lights on. And what does darkness have to do with light? We're going to deal with that in a couple of weeks with Michael Green. So we too, like Herodias, want to take care of it.

And it begins to be, if we're at stake, if our happiness is at stake, we will push down and trance on any individual, loved one, whatever. We all become Richard Nixon.

When Nixon's on the block, then it doesn't matter. He had his own kids, his own wife, his own best friends out there telling them he was innocent when he was guilty. When we're up against the wall,

we'll do anything, because we're threatened.

[12:58] In Herodias, we meet ourselves again in Herodias. Or maybe we're like Salome. We're willingly being used as a tool in someone else's sick motives or desires.

And at a certain point, that doesn't cut it either. It didn't cut it when they had the Nuremberg trials, when people said, I was just watching. And it doesn't cut it in today.

At a certain point, as adults, who's going to sit on the sidelines and say, that's wrong? Herod, you don't have to lose faith with me to spare a life of a righteous man. No one. No one did that.

They all were implicated by their silence. Or if we're followers of another person, or an idea, or another God, other than Christ.

See, no matter how ardent, or passion, or disciplined our life, or noble our ends, ultimately, like John's disciples, John goes out and gets buried.

[13:56] And the idea goes into the ground and disappears. Because John kept saying, I'm not the issue. But some of the disciples, though Jesus, John's disciples, though Jesus had arrived, still thought this was their man.

This was their issue. And it was a worthy goal. It was just the wrong goal. Now, the only survivor in this story, it seems to me, is Jesus Christ. And that's the person John the Baptist believed in.

They won't kill him or his ideas. He will begin to transcend not only human intrigue, but he soon transcends death, and he transcends life, because he becomes eternal.

And the disciples of Christ are very different than the disciples of John the Baptist, whose head is on a platter in a few minutes. In this story, the disciples of Jesus Christ encounter the resurrected Christ, we are told in Scripture, and thus they have a power.

And God's word, unlike Herod's, cannot be broken. And God's motives and power, unlike Herodias', are pure and loving and redemptive. You see?

[15:01] So, in the applied resurrection of the text of Christ, we all must ultimately dance with Christ himself. So the question is, we're in the midst of the Christmas chaos, as it comes, or cheers, or wherever we begin to sit on the sidelines.

Whatever issue we're dealing with today, might be preparation for Christmas, may not be. But you pick out the issue, and depending on the issue you're dealing with, if it's true that none of us are perfect, if it's true that all of us fall short, if it's true all of us are, you know, one great theologian said, what is the one thing we can give to God?

And this man said years ago, well, the only thing we can give to God are the sins from which we must be redeemed. You see, that's the only thing we can give to God. So, pick your topic today in your head, and I don't know what the issues are in your own life, where your moral or ethical compass has begun to go off their scale, and you find yourself having despair, or you're having lack of peace, or warping your motives, or an innocent bystander.

Pick the place, pick the category you want to deal with, and then find out who you're relating to. Are you relating to Herod? Because in that scene in your own life, you've got real power, but you've misused it, and that power is more important than following John the Baptist Christ.

Or are you like Salome, who's just an innocent bystander, trying to wash your hands, the corporation, or the activity, or whatever occurred, is something you don't want to really do with, and you won't risk yourself for it?

[16:31] Who do we identify with? I was having dinner the other night, and I see across the room from a Jewish doctor, ten of us, at a very small dinner party. And we started talking, and he was 60 years old, 64, and he was a part of this whole Holocaust occurrence 40 years ago.

And we started talking, and he said, well, and he's a Jew, he knows I'm a Christian, because I was asked to say grace. It's the curse of a minister. And I said, he said, I owe Christians a lot.

He says, they are the ones that hid me in France during World War II. And I said, well, he started telling me a story about how he's hidden in the daytime, he had to hide in the nighttime.

And you know that in Europe, if you harbored a Jew, if they found you, you became a Jew yourself. You went right to camp. Many of them died. We would come in at the Corrie ten Boom story.

The point is, is that the risk, and look at the risk you'd have, just to be a bystander. And say, I can't risk my family because of that.

[17:42] And six months ago, after 45 years, he took off, went back to France, and went to the farmhouse that saved his life during World War II. The farm wasn't there, but the national neighbors knew where the farmers lived, in town, went in town.

And as he drove up, there's a little sleepy village, he said, as he drove up in front of the front door, out came the young son that had been playing with him 45 years ago, and they immediately recognized each other. Can you imagine what kind of encounter that is?

Now in Israel, some of us have had the privilege to go, they have a memorial to the Holocaust. And it's the most incredible, you should go if you get there, it's the most incredible moving symbol. I'm not letting this issue die.

And in the midst of the Jews trying to protect their Jewishness, and trying to remind them of the grief of the Jews, there's one lane of trees, about four or five feet wide, that goes, I don't know, a long, long ways down the road, and it's called the Pathway of Justice.

And you know what it is? There are names of the Christians who hit the Jews during World War II. There are hundreds of thousands of them. And you can only be put on that path of justice by a Jew who was grateful, and he wrote in to them and said, you put this name down in this country in France, or Holland.

[18 : 59] You see? And in some sense, in some sense, where are we going to be found? On the path of justice, like these costly disciples of Christ in World War II, or are we going to be found at the banquet table watching goodness beheaded because it threatens us?

And the only distinct difference is who are we worshipping? John the Baptist would have stood up if he had been in the crowd. He would have taken them on and protected him. Where would we be? And the real kicker of this is there's nobody in the story to emulate.

All of them are threatening. We don't want to be like Herod. Nope. We don't want to be like Herodias. Nope. We don't want to be like Solomon. Nope. We don't want to be like the crowd. Nope. We don't want to be like the disciples of John because they were in despair.

The only person we respect in the whole story is John the Baptist. And we can't be John the Baptist. He was a holy man, he was righteous, and he was completely honest.

So the one person we admire, we can't be. And that brings us to the gospel of Jesus Christ. For we are unrighteousness, but he who was righteous took our unrighteousness upon himself.

[20 : 06] And we who are sinners, while we were sinners, he died for our unrighteousness. He died for our sin. He came down and said, I see you're between a rock and a hard place that the person you admire, you cannot be, so I will show you how to do it.

I'll die for you. You won't have to be in despair at the end of the story because the end of the story is Jesus Christ's love and forgiveness found on the cross of Christ. And the birth story that we're going to celebrate in a couple of weeks, like Harry said, the irony is, when he died, the world came to darkness.

And when he was born, the world had light. And it comes down to Jesus Christ as a distinctive difference. So the assignment of the text, to me, and to you, is where we want to be.

We want to be in the dance hall with the dancing girl in a temporary fleeting fancy of a good time? Or do we want to be on the pathway of justice with our names found faithful when called to choose between the hard road of following Christ and the shallow but disappearing road of following the world?

That, to me, is the struggle of the text. And I assure you that John the Baptist and the disciples of Christ would say there's no option that we must follow the Christ of the resurrection.

[21 : 28] Let's pray. Father, how do we come to grips with this story?

We need your mercy and we need your strength. We need your resolve. We need to read it and not despair but to look to Christ who brought John the Baptist hope who offers us the same hope.

And may the resurrection that so scared Herod liberate us because we know it was true and we know it was done to show us your love and your mercy.

May we embrace it in Christ's name. Amen.