

The Awful Silence Of God

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[0 : 00] Can we turn together to the Gospel of Luke this time? The Gospel according to Luke in the 23rd chapter.

And we'll read a short portion of this chapter from the beginning. Then the whole company of them arose and brought Jesus before Pilate.

And they began to accuse him, saying, We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.

And Pilate asked him, Are you the king of the Jews? And he answered him, You have said so. Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, I find no guilt in this man.

But they were urgent, saying, He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea from Galilee even to this place. Now when Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.

[1 : 18] And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. And when Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him.

So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. And the chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him.

Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, they sent him back to Pilate. And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.

And especially the words in verses 8 and 9, And when Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him.

And he was hoping to see some sign done by him. So he questioned him at some length, but he, that is Jesus, made no answer.

[2 : 29] It's quite fashionable to give sermons titles.

And if I were to give this message this morning a title, the one that I would pick for it would be The Awful Silence of God.

Our two readings this morning tell us the story of one man. The story of a man who had a chance, but who didn't take it, and was never offered another one.

This man's name is Herod. His full name is Herod Antipas. And he was one of the sons of another Herod, Herod the Great. Herod the Great was the cruel, bloodthirsty man who put little value on human life, other than his own human life, of course.

Herod the Great is the Herod who ordered the slaughter of all the baby boys in Jerusalem after Jesus was born. When Herod the Great died, his kingdom was divided into four parts.

[3 : 41] And his son, Herod Antipas, ruled over one of these parts. And this is why he's called Herod the Tetrarch. He's also known as Herod the Tetrarch because he ruled over just a quarter of what his father's kingdom had been.

Herod Antipas is the man, as we read, who befriended, protected, and then ordered the beheading of John the Baptist. Herod Antipas is the only man that Jesus ever refused to speak to.

In the early hours of the morning on the first Good Friday, Jesus stood on trial before him. But Jesus had absolutely nothing to say to him.

But wait a minute. Hold on a moment. Don't we think of Jesus as the friend of sinners? Didn't Jesus himself say that no one who came to him would be rejected?

In Bethany, Mary, who's described as a woman of the city, wet his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, and he declared that her sins were forgiven.

[4 : 56] Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, cried out for mercy, and Jesus stopped his journey to forgive him and to heal him. Zacchaeus, a hated, crooked tax collector, climbed a tree to see Jesus.

And Jesus not only bade him come down, but went to his house to eat and to share in his hospitality. Jesus truly does welcome all who come to him in sincerity.

And he turns no one away. But here this morning, we read that Jesus refused to speak to one man, to a king, to Herod Antipas.

And this incident is so unusual, so seemingly out of character for all that we know about Jesus and his mission and his message. Jesus, the Messiah, the Savior of our souls, that it deserves our attention.

Surely there's something in this incident that we need to think about, that we need to stop and consider together, and that's exactly what we're going to do this morning. Now, there are only a couple of times in the Bible where Herod Antipas, this man, is mentioned.

[6 : 10] And we only really get a good view of him in the two incidents that we read off in our two readings. First, in the events that surround the death of John the Baptist, and then at the trial of Jesus, just a few hours before he was nailed to the cross on Calvary's Hill.

And taking these incidents together, these two stories, these two pictures, we get a picture of Herod himself that shows him to be complex, a blend of qualities and characteristics.

He's a mixture of arrogance, spiritual curiosity, moral weakness. He is vain. He's concerned about what people think about him, what his reputation is with his friends and his acolytes.

He has a wandering, lustful eye. He is easily seduced. He is prone to rash statements. He doesn't look before he leaps.

And he is unwilling to commit to the truth. Now, looking at his encounters with both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ, we find a man whose morally bankrupt life ended in eternal spiritual tragedy.

[7 : 27] And the first thing we notice is that Herod's loyalties were divided. And the story of Herod's self-destruction begins not with his meeting with Jesus, but earlier when he met with John the Baptist and when he sought to protect John the Baptist.

Here are two men, John and Herod. They would seem to have nothing at all in common at totally opposite ends of the social spectrum, as it were.

Herod, a typical ruler of his time, intoxicated by his own power, egocentric, focused on his own personal pleasure and his own wealth.

John, on the other hand, by anybody's measure, was something of a strange man, an enigma, a cousin of Jesus. And when we read about him in the Gospels, as a full-grown adult, he is somewhere in his 30s.

And there's something of the air of the Old Testament prophets about John, an Elijah or an Isaiah or an Elisha, a fiery, no-compromise man of God.

[8 : 39] He lived in the desert. He wore rough camels, hair, clothing, and his diet consisted mainly of locusts and of wild honey. And I think you'll agree with me that that was not a particularly appetizing diet.

But although John lived in the wilderness, John did not shun people. He was not a hermit. He was not a recluse living in a cave.

He preached loudly, and he preached regularly to all who would come and listen. Crowds did, in fact, come from all over Judea to hear him tell of the Messiah, whose arrival was imminent.

So Herod and John the Baptist, they became acquainted. And Herod took John into what we might call protective custody. Why?

Well, Mrs. Herod had a grudge against John. Mrs. Herod did not like what John was saying in his sermons about the immoral and sinful way that she and her husband were living their lives.

[9 : 48] Now, Herod does not seem to have been too bothered by John's condemnation. On the contrary, Herod was scared of John.

He feared John. And perhaps he was more scared of John than he was of his wife. And Herod's curiosity was aroused by John.

In Mark, we're told that Herod feared John and he protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and a holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled. Yet he liked to listen to him.

So Herod liked John. But Herod also had an eye for his brother's wife. History tells us that in 29 AD, Herod Antipas went to Rome to visit his brother, Herod Philip.

And when in Rome, he became very interested in Herod Philip's wife. In fact, he became overly interested in her and began an affair with her.

[10:49] Now, this woman's name was Herodias. Notice her name. Herodias is the feminine or the female version of the name Herod.

This woman belonged to the same family as Herod Antipas. She was not only Herod Philip's wife, Herod Antipas' brother's wife, but she was also Herod Philip's niece.

And because Herod Philip and Herod Antipas were brothers, she was Herod Antipas' niece as well. So in addition to this being an adulterous relationship that broke down family bonds as one brother took the wife of another, this was also an illicit relationship where an uncle married his niece and both of these were expressly forbidden by God and his word.

So this is King Herod Antipas when we find him in the New Testament, the ruler of Galilee, married to his niece with whom he committed adultery and whom he stole from his brother.

Their sin is open. Their sin is public. And together he and Herodias are shameless. John the Baptist knew about Herod and his sin.

[12:08] Frankly, everybody knew about it. And as a man of truth, John condemned the whole thing, condemned the adultery, condemned the divorce, and condemned the illicit relationship that was formed.

Now it has to be said that John was a brave man. Without fear or favor, John confronted Herod directly to his face, telling him that what he had done was wrong.

And John seems to have repeated this message over and over and over again to Herod. Now this would have been a sure sentence of death for anybody else, but Herod liked to listen to John.

And Herod thought, considered, contemplated what John said to him. He kept John in prison to protect him from the schemes, the murderous schemes of Herodias.

He thought that he could control the situation, that he could keep John safe, whilst at the same time keeping Herodias as his wife. And when we read the pages of Scripture, friends, we see that that was like keeping a tiger in a paper cage.

[13:22] Things were only going to go wrong. The Herod is the very picture of a tortured, troubled, tormented soul. One part of Herod knew that John spoke the truth.

Unlike the sycophants, the yes-men of Herod's court, who fell over themselves to agree with his every whim, John didn't care. About power, or wealth, or influence, or any of the trappings that went with being a friend of the king.

John only cared for righteousness, and for truth, and for the word of God. And Herod listened to him, and listened, and listened again. But the other part of Herod, the baser part of Herod, wanted what God said in his word that he could not have.

A woman, his sister-in-law, his niece, no less, who was married to someone else. He wanted this woman who had caught his eye and for whom he had put away his first wife, this woman that he had brought into his life and into his palace.

What did Herod do? What was his plan? What was his answer to this? Well, Herod tried to have it both ways.

[14:36] He tried to have his cake and eat it, as we say. He put John in prison so that he could protect him, and he took the woman, Herodias, as his wife.

Now let's stop there for a second, friends. Let's just take a little breath, and let me ask you a personal question this morning.

Are you a bit like Herod? Is there a bit of you... Are you trying to live two lives?

On the one hand, you like coming to God's house and hearing what the minister has to say when he preaches from the pulpit. You like hearing the preaching about the love of Jesus, about his birth and his life and his death and his resurrection.

You like hearing how good always ultimately triumphs over evil in the end. You like hearing how the bad guys, Goliath, Ahab, Judas, Pilate, even Herod himself, you like hearing how they always get their just desserts.

[15:48] You like to bring your children that you had baptized, perhaps in this very building, you like them to bring them here because it's the right thing to do. Maybe even the best thing to do, and friends, you are right, it is.

But on the other hand, you like your life just as it is. You are in charge. Church is fine, but maybe only once on a Sunday. Thank you very much.

You don't want to look like some sort of an enthusiast. You want to live your life your way, not by the rules of this old book. You are an intelligent, educated person after all with a good job.

People look up to you, don't they? There's no need for more of a commitment. You're just fine. You will listen. You will hear, but you will not commit.

You think that you can keep the demands of God in a box that you only need to open on a Sunday and maybe then only for an hour. Well, let me warn you, friends, that no one can live in the middle ground forever.

[16:58] You can't sit on that fence all your days. Sooner or later, you will choose. You will either actively choose Jesus Christ as your Savior or passively you will choose eternal damnation by letting all your chances slowly slip away.

Herod knew the truth when he heard it, but Herod made the mistake of trying to keep that truth locked in a compartment, boxed off from the rest of his life where it wouldn't bother him too much. That never works. That never, never works. Truth demands a decision. Scripture asks us to choose who we will serve. And the correct answer to that question is, as for me and my house, we will serve God.

The second thing we notice about Herod is that he made a bad decision. He made their wrong decision. For long enough, he could not and he would not make a decision.

He would not give up Herodias, but at the same time he would not put John to death and he kept him safe. He knew the truth, but he would not obey it.

[18:18] He knew he shouldn't have this woman, but oh, how he wanted her. And torn by these competing, conflicting desires, he lived in a terrible no-man's land.

What was he to do? How was he to resolve it? Well, friends, the answer came at Herod's own birthday party. And for Herod's birthday, there was a great feast to which all his main men were invited, his courtiers, his generals, his friends, his counsellors, the men he liked to impress. No doubt alcohol will have flowed freely. Tongues will have been loosened with tall tales of bravado which would have been told and salty stories would have been swapped. And it would have been a boisterous affair.

The Herods were not known for their great refinement. And as the party went on, Herod's daughter, a young teenage girl called Salome, was sent into this charged environment to dance for the king and his circle of friends.

Now, this wasn't classical ballet or Scottish country dancing that this girl was performing for these men. This was a performance designed to incite Herod's baser instincts, to arouse Herod's lower side.

[19:36] This dance was choreographed by Herodias to have Herod eating right out of her hands. And what with the wine and the company, it must have worked because this otherwise intelligent man made a rash, stupid promise.

Herod fuelled by alcohol, egged on by bravado, his passion aroused, offered this teenage girl anything up to half of his kingdom.

Herod fell headlong into the trap set by his own wife, the object of his own desire, the scheming Herodias. How Herodias must have rejoiced.

Now she could finally be free from the nagging voice of John the Baptist and his endless moralizing. How dare he say that they were leading sinful lives.

Now she can remove John's wholesome influence from her husband. Now Herod Antipas will be completely and totally hers. And so she instructs Salome to ask for John the Baptist's head as payment.

[20:46] How great is the fall of Herod here. This man has no moral standard to live by, no moral compass to guide him.

And this traps him. When the girl asked for her desired payment, it's too late for Herod. He's shocked, he's stunned, he knows that he has gone too far.

But Herod had a fatal character flaw. Herod was a vain man, stupidly vain, and he was trapped by his own vanity. He can't back down in front of all his merry men.

So he stupidly agrees to her price. The trap is sprung, the prey is caught. Now let's stop here again for a moment. Let's just see what's going on.

This man Herod, remember he was the king. She was just a teenage girl, but he was the king. His word was law. So he could have said no. He could have backed down.

[21 : 50] He could have said, you can have anything but that. But he didn't. He didn't say that. He gave her what she wanted. Why?

Why? Well, quite simply, Herod didn't want to lose face in front of his mates, his pals.

The guys that he liked to impress with his fashionable clothes and his witty banter and his great parties and his fast chariots and his magnificent palace. He didn't want to stop being one of the boys.

Let me ask you, is this what's keeping you back from making the right decision about God today? Fear of your friends. Fear of what they'll say.

How they'll laugh behind your back. How your reputation will suffer. Is that what's keeping you back? Well, friends, if your friends laugh at you because you make a stand for Christ, if they think less of you because you care about the state of your never dying soul, then they are not friends.

[23 : 02] At least they're not friends worth having. Better their laughter. Better their derision. Their mocking. Than the awful silence of God that will follow you on the day of judgment when he tells you, depart from me.

I never knew you. Herod made the wrong decision. Herod chose the wrong path and it cost him his eternal soul.

He was scared of what his buddies thought and that kept him from doing what he knew was right. And the sad thing, friends, is that these friends, this bunch of revelers, were probably only Herod's friends because of what they could get from him.

Not because they liked the man for himself. And so he gave permission. Herod gave permission for the personal messenger of God to Herod to be silenced forever.

How could such a thing have happened? Herod knew that John the Baptist spoke only the truth that he taught from the word of God. Herod liked being taught by John.

[24 : 26] Herod liked his sin more. Herod liked his sin more. Herod had a seared conscience. That's what happens when you hear the truth over and over and over but you do nothing about it.

Sooner or later your heart becomes hardened. Heard it before. Didn't hear anything new. your conscience is seared. Your ears close so that the truth of the gospel no longer penetrates.

No longer touches you. The voice of the preacher in the pulpit just becomes so much white noise until eventually you drown it out altogether.

let me warn you my friends this morning it is extremely dangerous to be exposed to the teaching of God's word without offering a positive personal response.

And the third thing we see about Herod is that Herod suffered from remorse. over time words spread throughout Judea about Jesus and his teachings and his miracle working power.

[25 : 41] Some thought that it was Elijah back from the dead but Herod's conscience drove him to his own slightly strange conclusion. He said John the man that I beheaded has been raised from the dead and from that we can see that guilt had obviously been gnawing away inside Herod all of this time.

He knew that John was a holy man of God and he knew that John spoke the truth. Herod was remorseful about his foolish stupid oath that led to the death of the man of God.

And now the blood of that righteous man is on his hands. Guilt is working on his mind playing on his fears. The man that he had beheaded had come back to haunt him.

As Jesus fame spreads Herod wants to meet him just like he met with John. Perhaps Jesus will have a word for him. But Jesus doesn't want to meet with Herod.

Jesus is like a ghost in the midst. He appears in the distance and then disappears into the countryside avoiding Herod so that Herod's attitude towards Jesus begins to change.

[26 : 54] Perhaps he sees Jesus as a threat from when the people sought to take Jesus and make him their king. But whatever the reason Herod concludes that Jesus is a nuisance and must be killed.

And when Jesus is warned to leave the area for his own safety he replies with the only message that he ever directed at Herod personally and you can read it for yourselves in Luke chapter 13 and it's not a pleasant message.

Go tell that fox Jesus says I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow and on the third day I will reach my goal.

Now to call somebody a fox then meant just exactly the same as if we would use it today. They were crafty, they were sly, they were tricky, they were deceitful. Jesus saw through Herod's veneer

of interest and knew that there was nothing but evil lurking underneath and his is simply you do not have the power to kill me.

I have come to do God's will and you cannot stop me until that is done. Why did Herod want to kill Jesus? Well the answer is not hard to find.

[28 : 11] We as human beings we like to control things. We like control. And what we cannot control we fear. And what we fear we try to destroy.

So this was Herod. And this was the stage set now for the final showdown between Jesus and Herod on the first Good Friday. And Herod displayed on that day a degree of curiosity. Herod was curious. Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane sometime around midnight. And after his arrest Jesus was bundled from one hearing to another.

The high priests, the Sanhedrin, Pilate, they all had a go at him. And during this time he suffered ridicule, mocking, insults, false accusations.

The Jews wanted him out of their way. They wanted him dead, this upstart joiner from the backwoods of Nazareth. He had been a thorn in their side for three long years.

[29 : 12] But only the Romans had the power of capital punishment. Only the Romans could put Jesus to death. So Jesus ends up before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, a man with little sympathy for either the Jews or the Jewish religion.

And when Jesus appears before him, he finds nothing in Jesus to justify the death penalty that the Jews are asking for. And when he heard Jesus was from Galilee, the region ruled by Herod, Pilate saw a way out for himself.

Since Herod just happened to be in Jerusalem that week, Pilate sent Jesus to Herod to let him handle this messy problem. At last, Herod gets his wish to meet Jesus face to face.

But the meeting, my friends, did not go the way that Herod expected. Now, the text says that Herod's was greatly pleased to meet Jesus because Herod thinks that he's going to get Jesus to perform a miracle or two or three for his royal entertainment, something to tell his mates back at the palace about.

He thinks Jesus is going to do some wonder or other for him. After all, doesn't he, doesn't Herod have the power to release Jesus? Doesn't he hold the power of life and death over Jesus?

[30 : 37] So surely this man will be willing to provide some form of entertainment. So on it went. Herod put in question after question to Jesus, all of them bouncing off Jesus deafening wall of silence.

Now I'm sure Herod was taken aback when this little man as he saw him from Nazareth refused to speak to him. Nobody treated Herod the king like that.

And as the interview went on the surprise would have gradually slowly turned to rage. You know friends and I know that there are times in life when silence speaks louder than words and this was one of these times.

Jesus knew that Herod was not serious with him and that his questions did not come from an open and honest heart. Herod was only interested in the entertaining stuff, the miracles.

He wasn't interested in the important stuff, not the deep realities of eternal salvation. Jesus saw no reason to answer and so he opened not his mouth.

[31 : 48] Remember Jesus himself in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7 warned against the casting of pearls before swine. Now Herod wouldn't have seen himself as swine but he belonged to a class of people who have become spiritually blind and determined in their resistance to the truth.

When Herod killed John when he forever closed the mouth of that great preacher he murdered the messenger of God sent to warn Herod of his sin. Sent to direct Herod in the way that he should go to the salvation of his own soul.

He killed the messenger and he also killed the message of God to him. He chose to satisfy the lusts of his own flesh over his need for eternal life.

He chose a vicious bitter scheming woman over a loving heavenly father. And in doing this Herod lost the ability to hear the voice of Jesus.

He hardened his own heart to the gospel of the Lord Jesus. But his silence is saying something to Herod. His silence is giving him a message.

[32 : 59] His silence is saying you did not accept the truth when John spoke it. You said no. That was your final answer. And I accept your answer. You will not hear the truth again.

Herod then showed his true character. When Jesus refuses to answer him, the interview turns nasty. Herod takes a spite against this carpenter who is silently stubbornly defying him. He is Herod after all. He is the king. How dare this upstart ignore him. While Herod and his soldiers join with the Jews in mocking the son of God, the king of kings who stands before them silent in his absolute strength.

And here, friends, we see Herod's true character appearing. Any genuine spiritual interest has long since disappeared. How quickly his mood changes when Jesus refuses to join in and play his game.

Herod mocks Jesus, but he can't find him guilty of any crime. But Herod shares in the guilt of the death of Christ. Herod knew more than Pilate did.

[34 : 10] Through John the Baptist, Herod heard the truth of God. And the Bible says, to whom much is given, much will be required. God heard the moment when he finally met Jesus.

In the face of the awful silence of God where he asked but received no response, Herod's rejection of God became complete. Herod's rejection of God became eternal.

Herod's heart had been closed ever since the death of John the Baptist. He never called out to Christ and never came to him with anything resembling an open heart. And that's why Jesus had nothing to say to him.

The silence of Jesus was the eternal judgment on Herod. Friends, God's not obliged to send his spirit again and again and again to knock on the door of your heart.

The patience of God can and does wear thin without continued rebellion and there will come a time when he will let you go your own way. Look at all the books that made up the Bible written over thousands of years.

[35 : 22] Lots of books, a majestic tome. But if you read your Bible, if you know your Bible, just six chapters into the first book of the Bible, into the first installment, into Genesis, really early on, we are told that God regretted that he had made man, that it grieved him to his heart.

God sent the great flood that wiped out all humanity except Noah and his family. God sent messages to Herod through John and Herod ignored them.

Don't ignore the messages that God sends you from this pulpit, from his word. Even the heavens declare God's glory. Don't ignore the strivings that you feel every time that you climb the steps of this building.

Don't let God regret that he made you. Don't let him grieve him to his heart that he called you into being. Don't let him say that his spirit will no longer strive with you.

Don't dare say I will come to Christ later when I'm older. I'll live for him after I finish school, after I go to university, after I have some fun, after I get married.

[36 : 36] I'll be a Christian someday when I have finally settled down. Who knows how long your life will last. We've seen it over these past few months, young lives bought to an abrupt end.

Do not say I know I need God but I want to have fun first, to live a bit, to see what life's about. Herod chose the path of fun over the path of God and for Herod now is the time to come to Christ.

Now is the best day that you will ever have to give your heart to the Lord. Now is the perfect moment to follow Jesus. Now is the only day that you have.

Now is the day of salvation. The life of Herod Antipas is nothing but supreme tragedy. Sometime after this, Herodias brother, his own brother-in-law turned against him and accused him of treason to Caligula, the new insane Roman emperor.

And Caligula swallowed these groundless charges, hook, line, and sinker. He took Herod's power away. He took Herod's money away. He took his kingdom away.

[38 : 00] And he gave it all to Herodias' brother, Agrippa. Herod Antipas was exiled. And there in exile he died, either of old age or as some historians have said, Caligula had him murdered.

And as it was said of another man in the scriptures, in hell he opened his eyes. What a waste. What a colossal waste. Herod spurned the chances God gave him in John the Baptist, his own personal preacher, his own messenger direct from the throne of God, so that when he finally met with Jesus it was all too late.

Face to face with the Son of God, face to face with the Creator of the universe, face to face with the Savior of our souls, and the Redeemer of sinners. What a waste.

Don't let that be said of you, my friends. You're face to face with Jesus again right now in this building. Grasp him.

[39 : 12] Do not let him go till he blesses you. Wrestle with him in prayer. Ask him into your heart and into your soul and to take command of your lives.

Before all he gives you is his silence. Amen. Let us pray. Eternal Father, we ask that you would turn us from following wickedness to following you.

you. That while we are still upon mercy's ground, that we would come to you. And that we would ask you into our hearts and into our souls. Bless us, bless all that we seek to do here, and watch over us, we pray, for Jesus' sake.

Amen.