

House of Cards

Mark 6: 14-29

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If your guilty pleasure is binging on *House of Cards* or *Game of Thrones*, or any of the other delightfully twisted television dramas, stay tuned. I have a Biblical episode that will make those shows seem like *Sesame Street*!

It is our story from Mark's gospel where John the Baptist is beheaded. However, before we can understand all that surrounds the story, we have to dig up some Roman history, specifically the history of the royal family called the Herods.

The Herod of our story is Herod Antipas, who was one of the many sons of Herod the Great. Sorting out the Herods of the New Testament can be confusing. But Herod the Great, you may recall, is the Herod we meet in the birth stories of Jesus, the one whom the Magi visited and knew he was a bad actor. He told them that he too wanted to know the whereabouts of the newly born king so he could honor him. Wrong! He is the one who ordered the slaughter of the Jewish babies soon after to eliminate any rival. Psychotic is the way we would describe this Herod.

To understand the relationships in our story is to know more about this psychotic King, Herod the Great. He married five different women and then had many children by these different wives. Because of that, there were many half brothers and sisters in Palestine who had Herod the Great as their father. Think of how *Entertainment Tonight* would like to cover those family reunions!

Herod's first wife was Doris, and they had a son, Antipater, whom Herod later murdered because he was suspicious that his son would try to take over his rule. Did I also mention that Herod was paranoid? Then he married Marianne and had two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, whom Herod also murdered for the same reason of suspicion.

And you thought *Game of Thrones* had a twisted family.

But before he was killed, Aristobulus had a daughter. Her name was Herodias. She is the villainess of our story in Mark. Herod the Great married again, and had a son, Philip, who

later married Herodias' half-brother's daughter, and therefore his niece. Are you confused yet?

Hold on. Later Herod had another son by another marriage. That son was Herod Antipas, who is the Herod of our story in Mark.

Now, if that is not enough to arouse Hollywood's interest, hear this: Herod Antipas (that's *our* Herod in today's story) goes to Rome one day to visit his half-brother Philip. Philip's wife is Herodias. Remember Roman historians say that Herod "seduced" Herodias and then persuaded her to leave her husband and marry him. She did.

Now that is a family HBO can be proud of!

So, to sum up our *House of Cards*: Since Herodias was the daughter of Herod Antipas' half-brother, Aristobulus, she was therefore *our* Herod's niece. And because she was the wife of his half-brother, Philip, she was also his sister-in-law!

What can you say? Family matters.

Enter in our *House of Cards*, John the Baptist, whom you recall was a significant figure in the life and ministry of Jesus. We often call him the forerunner of Jesus who proclaimed the Messiah who was to come and then reluctantly baptized Jesus when he began his earthly ministry.

Now John the Baptist was not what one might call a smooth operator. Suave, debonair, and diplomatic are not words that would describe John. Rather, he was a rough-around-the-edges prophet who lived in the desert, who lashed out at the ungodly, injustice, and immorality with fire and righteous indignation. His road was the straight and narrow, and when John heard about Herod seducing his brother's wife, then stealing her, what do you imagine John said to Herod?

"Herod, you old dog. This Herodias is one fine looking woman and you must have had your A game to have lured her away from Philip."

I doubt it.

Or, “Well, Herod, I know you come from a broken and mixed up family, and I’m sure you received little love from your insane father. You must be ravaged with insecurity and low self-esteem. It is no wonder you lured Herodias away.”

Not a chance.

No, this is what John said: “Herod, it is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.”

Blunt. Straight as a stick.

And though John’s words may have bothered Herod, they irritated his acquired wife, Herodias, to no end. “Who does this Jew think he is? My grandfather was a king and I’m married to a ruler.”

She wanted John and his self-righteous voice to be eliminated! But Herod, strange Herod, for whatever reason, did not want John killed. Mark says Herod protected John because he knew him to be a holy and righteous man. So as a compromise, Herod merely imprisoned John.

Oh, the compromises we make in a marriage!

Mark also says that Herod liked listening to John, which I find intriguing. Why would he like listening to this blunt-talking prophet who reminded him of his sin and who talked about a God Herod did not worship? It reminds me of a man I once knew who was as mean as a snake but never missed a Sunday in church!

Well, it was Herod’s birthday and Herod planned a great banquet at his palace which sat on a cliff overlooking the Dead Sea. Invited were the movers and shakers of his day – the highest government officials, his military commanders, and the leading men of Galilee. It would be like a United States President having his cabinet members, the top military brass, and the likes of the Senate Majority Leader and the House Speaker at his birthday gala. It was big. Very big!

And the party was going well. But the highlight of the evening came when Herodias’ teenage daughter, Salome, step-daughter of the birthday boy, decides that she will dance. And does she dance! When she finished, Herod’s mouth was left hanging open. The bartenders had been heavy handed and Herod exclaimed before all of his powerful company his absolute delight, and he promised Salome anything she would like.

Herod was thinking: diamonds, jewelry, more servants, a trip to the Mediterranean Coast.

But such an opportunity could not be taken lightly, so Salome sought a mother's advice. She went to her mother and asked, "What should I ask for?"

Bingo. For Herodias knew she had Herod right where she wanted him for there was only one thing that Herod would not do for her — eliminate John the Baptist. So she told her daughter to request the head of John the Baptist, who was locked up in the dungeon below.

Don't you wonder what Herod's expression was when he heard the request from his step-daughter: "The head of John the Baptist?"

Oh, poor Herod. How he trapped himself with his promise. How he must have felt with the House Speaker and military officials looking on. Had his birthday been just a family affair with his wife and step-daughter, how it could have been so different, how he could have reneged on his careless promise or negotiated another way. But the party had turned into a political theater where his ego, his power, his pride, and his manhood were at stake.

Now, from what we know, Herod was probably not the evil man his father was; nor as psychotic or paranoid. I remember that someone once observed, after World War II and the Holocaust, that they were surprised the Nazi's convicted of the horrible crimes were not the evil men they had expected; rather they were very ordinary kinds of people, who had occupied ordinary kinds of jobs and positions.

Which is to say, that evil is often the result of our weakness rather than our meanness. My guess is that Herod was not so much evil as he was a weak and insecure man.

Herod understood cruelty as strength. Because we all know that people in positions of leadership and power have to be careful they don't appear weak. Right? There is something akin to political suicide when a politician vacillates or changes his or her mind. No, the inclination of those in power, especially political power, is that it is better to appear strong but wrong rather than indecisive or wavering and get it right.

So here was Herod who had pledged an oath, sensing it would be perceived as weakness if he backed out. Therefore, Herod decided cruel murder was an act of strength. So he cut off John's head, even though we rightly assume he really did not want to.

Makes me wonder how many times you and I find ourselves in a similar circumstance. No, not with the stakes of murder but being faced with making a decision we don't want to make because, somehow, we believe our authority or leadership, or strength, or ego, is at stake.

It happens in relationships all the time. It happens in decision making in the workplace all the time. It happens in politics all the time.

And of course, if Herod had been strong, he would have had the inner strength to stand tall in front of the high brass and say he had misspoken when he promised Salome anything she wanted. But Herod did not have such inner strength.

No, Herod was thinking, "What will people think, if I don't go through with this?" Which is to say, when we let what people think of us become our moral compass, we are pretty much in trouble. Right?

No, Herod was not nearly as evil as he was weak. And my guess is that when you and I go off the straight and narrow, it is not because we are mean, sinister, or evil. It has more to do with our lacking inner strength and who or Who we are trying to please.

Are you with me?

Now, the truth is I balked at using this lectionary text for today's sermon because the story has all the ingredients of a morality tale. But we can get morality tales from children's fables. So where is the Good News in this first century *House of Cards*?

Well, some might conclude that Herod learned that night he was dealing with the consequences of his misguided decisions made a long time ago – his seduction and marriage to his brother's wife. But life is full of our wrong and misguided decisions. Right? What Herod never learned is that it takes a Power beyond us to confront and deal with our past.

You and I know that Power as the Power of Christ. Rather than wallowing in the mistakes we make in our past (and repeating them again and again), we understand the way forward as honesty, repentance, grace, redemption, and transformation. It's the Good News of the Gospel rather than a *House of Cards*.