

Our passage for today is the only major section of Mark's Gospel about someone other than Jesus. John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin. His conception in the womb of Mary's aunt, Elizabeth, was a miracle. Zacharias and Elizabeth were well past the age of being able to conceive. The account reminds us of Abraham and Sarah. Perhaps God intervenes in this way to let us know the child to be born has a unique calling. For Abraham and Sarah it was Isaac, the son of promise. From Isaac was born Jacob whose name was changed to Israel, the father of the Israelites. In Zacharias' and Elizabeth's case it was to bring forth the messenger who was to prepare the way of the Lord. He came in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17ⁱ). His calling was to make people prepared for the coming of the Lord by repenting of their sins.

John's parents who were elderly when he was born must have died when he was young. There is speculation that John went to Qumran as there was a record of one Yohanan who joined the group. This was also where he could have read the scroll of Malachi and Isaiah from which he drew the proclamation, "*I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.*" (Isaiah 40:3ⁱⁱ) He wore the prophet Elijah's dress of rough camel hair and a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild honey (Leviticus 11:22ⁱⁱⁱ).

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." Mark 6:14 The Herod in our passage is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. After his father's death in 4BC he reigned over Galilee and Perea. He was raised and educated in Rome. He was not his father's first choice as heir, for he was the son of his first wife, Mathrace, whom he divorced. His sons born of Mariamne, the wife he stole from his brother, Herod II, were his favorites. The passage calls Antipas a king, but he was a tetrarch. The Kingdom of Herod the Great was divided between his sons.

Herod had heard reports about a miracle worker and was concerned that Jesus might be John the Baptist returned. Jesus was just six months younger than John, so Herod was imagining Jesus was inhabited by the spirit of John whom he had executed. John did not perform any miracles during his ministry. Perhaps Herod thought the spirit of John had inhabited Jesus giving Him supernatural powers.

John was bold and uncompromisingly fearless. He called the religious leaders a brood of vipers (Matthew 3:7^{iv}). He denounced Herod for breaking Jewish law by marrying his brother's wife. Some accounts say Herod had used magic to seduce her.

John drew great crowds as there had not been a prophet for 400 years. Herod's wife, Herodias, was particularly annoyed by John's calling out their marriage as sinful. Herod had John arrested and kept him in a dungeon in the southern most part of his territory where he had built a magnificent palace with walls and high towers.

¹⁵ But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." *¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."* Mark 6:15,16 In chapter 8^v Jesus will ask the disciples, "Who do people say I am?" They will answer that some say Elijah and others say one of the prophets. Elijah was considered one of the greatest prophets. Elisha performed twice as many miracles, but that was because he had double Elijah's anointing (1 Kings 2:9,10^{vi}). According to the prophet Malachi, Elijah was to appear again before the Messiah came.

(Malachi 4:5^{vii}). Even in our day Jews set a place for Elijah at Passover meals. At one point in the meal someone is sent to look outside the door to see if he is coming. Jesus declared that role was fulfilled in John the Baptist (Matthew 11:13,14^{viii}). Another reason they might think that He was Elijah is that Elijah did not die. He was caught up in flaming chariot and taken to heaven (2 Kings 2:11^{ix}). If he did not die then he might have returned. Whatever the reason, to call Jesus Elijah was to recognize the many amazing works He was doing.

Others said He is like one of the prophets of old. His teaching with authority and bold confrontation with the oral law and the religious leaders showed Him to be as fearless as John the Baptist. But the reason they did not say that He is the Messiah is that their expectation of the Messiah was skewed toward a military commander. Jesus certainly showed no sign of that. He taught and healed and cast out demons, but He certainly was not raising an army (John 6:15^x).

Herod Antipas was almost as paranoid as his father Herod the Great. Luke 9:9^{xi} tells us that Herod wanted to meet with Jesus. In Luke 13:31 the Pharisees tell Jesus to leave Galilee as Herod is seeking to kill Him. Some see the Pharisees somewhat sympathetic to Jesus because of His adherence to the Law. ³² *And he said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.* Luke 13:32; (31-33^{xii}). That may have been an allusion to Hosea 6:1,2^{xiii} in which God had smitten Israel but would revive her and on the third day she would be raised. It was a cryptic way of saying that like Jonah, though thought to be dead, He would resurrect on the third day (Matthew 12:40^{xiv}).

¹⁷ *For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her.* ¹⁸ *For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."* ¹⁹ *And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not,* Mark 6:17-19 Notice that it was for Herodias' sake that Herod arrested John. Herod feared the people who believed John was a prophet. He would not have bothered with John had John not condemned his marriage. Herodias may have feared that Herod would put her away. She could not go back to Philip. She would be an outcast. So, to keep her content, Herod had John arrested.

We cannot ignore this theme of women leading men astray in Scripture. Adam and Eve, Sampson and Delilah, Rebecca tricking Isaac, Ahab and Jezabel, and I could go on. It is not that women are more wicked than men or that men do not lead women astray. At the same time, we must be honest with human nature and aware of our differences and weaknesses. "If mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy," is a saying as old as the hills. Not only did Herodias have her way in the arrest, but she is about to trick Herod into crossing a line he never intended to cross. Women can have that power over men to the point where a man will do what he never intended to do.

To the men I say, "*Love your wife as Christ loved the church*" (Ephesians 5:25^{xv}) Would Jesus compromise His holiness and righteousness if we whined in prayer day and night about something we want that is not good for the kingdom of God? No way! And He would not do it because He loves us. Stand your ground on your convictions, but do so with love. In a moment we will see why Herod would not do that.

To the women I say, respect your husband, especially his moral convictions (Ephesians 5:33^{xvi}). If he thinks something is wrong, honor that and do not try to get him

to violate his conscience. You may disagree and you may be right, but if you pressure him into doing something he thinks is wrong, it certainly will not help him love you more. Instead, agree to disagree but let him live his convictions. You do not want him to be a person who violates his conscience for you. That is not a respectable man. Men can show their love by letting their wives have their way in many areas of daily life, but if husbands feel they cannot lead and stand firm on their convictions, they will be miserable.

²⁰ for 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. Mark 6:20 What a tormented soul Herod was! He was eager to listen to John call him out on his sinful lifestyle. He wanted to hear the Scriptures John quoted and wondered if his life might be changed. People honored John. Herod may have wondered if he became more obedient to God's Word and tried to walk with God like John did, perhaps the people would honor him too. He knew he was despised, so maybe this was a way to turn the tide. And yet, he could not imagine giving up his power and wealth.

There was something about John's fearlessness and conviction that Herod admired. How could John be so content in a prison when he had everything and was never content. Herod was living in the battlefield between flesh and spirit (Galatians 5:17^{xviii}). The Spirit of God would bring conviction, Herod's carnal nature would protest. He would contemplate righteousness one minute and lust the next. Back and forth he went. What John had was so attractive in one way and what Herod's flesh desired was so attractive in another.

Perhaps there are some of you here this morning who are in the same place. The peace and joy the gospel of Jesus offers sounds so wonderful, but there are things you know you would have to walk away from if you were to get serious about committing to Jesus. I pray the end of this account will help you decide to yield to God's Spirit.

²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. Mark 6:21 Herod's birthday came. Herodias saw this as an opportunity to get what she wanted. This was a time when it was likely that his upbringing in Rome made a pattern that he followed most of his life. Roman parties were feasting and drinking parties. As the evening went on and the guests became increasingly inebriated the sensuality would grow increasingly wild. This was a time when the flesh reigned supreme. Watch out for those times if you grew up with a pattern like Herod did. John's preaching was the last thing on his mind. He had set aside that turmoil within his soul and abandoned himself to the moment. At the same time, he was making an impression on those nobles, commanders, and leaders in his territory to insure their loyalty.

²² For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." ²³ And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." Mark 6:22,23 As the evening wore on and the guests were increasingly inebriated, professional dancers would entertain the guests with a provocative dance, but instead of the professionals, Herodias' daughter, Solome, came out to perform. This was very unusual for a woman of rank. She did such a magnificent performance that half-drunk Herod mimicked the words of king Ahasuerus to Esther. "Ask me for anything and I will give it to you, up to half my kingdom." This is exactly what Herodias had plotted.

24 And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." *25 And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."* Mark 6:24,25 Herodias held her scheme even from her daughter until the oath was made. This was her chance. Herod had refused to kill John, partly because of the anger it would incite in those who saw John as a prophet, and partly because he was fascinated with the conversations he had with him. There may have also been a twinge of the fear of God that kept him from harming a holy man.

A dutiful daughter, Solome repeated her mother's request but added a disgusting addition to her mother's instruction, "on a platter." She did not want to sully her hands by touching the severed head.

26 And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. Mark 6:26 Herod was more worried about what his guests would think of him if he broke his vow than he was about the wrath of God for killing God's prophet. He probably knew the Scripture that warned, "*Touch not my anointed ones, and do my prophets no harm!*" 1 Chronicles 16:22 But like the Pharisees whom he despised, he loved the praise of men more than the praise that comes from God (John 12:43^{xviii}). It is the weakness of our fallen nature, always trying to gain respect and honor from others. If we do not know how honored we are to be called God's children, or how loved we are in Christ, we will seek that honor from the world (1 John 3:1^{xix}). Do not forget that the world and its lusts are passing away, but the steadfast love of God endures forever (1 John 2:17^{xx}; 1 Chronicles 16:34^{xxi}).

I imagine Herod's heart sunk when he heard the request. He probably knew he had been caught in Herodias' trap. But inebriated and caught up in the revelry, he was not thinking clearly. He put himself in that position. John the Baptist was very austere. Surely he had warned Herod about indulging in the flesh. Now Herod could see that John had been sharing the wisdom of God with him, but he had not put it into practice. One thing that breaks my heart is giving wise counsel to young believers and seeing them ignore it to their own detriment.

27 And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison Mark 6:27 This scene in The Chosen^{xxii} is done so well. John lays his head on the chopping block. The executioner prepares to swing the axe. John's head is turned sideways looking toward an arched stone window. Through it he sees a lamb in a field that is looking toward him. He smiles, realizing that he had faithfully declared that Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world," not a military commander who would come and rescue him (John 1:29^{xxiii}). But how much better at that moment to know you will be at peace with God when you stand before Him, better than anything an earthly kingdom could offer. The axe came down.

John seeing the lamb is not in Scripture. But the authors of the script were making an interesting point. John had doubted that Jesus was the One because He did not rescue John. Nor was Jesus raising an army. John knew the prophecies concerning the Messiah declared that He would reign forever over the entire world (Revelation 11:15^{xxiv}; Exodus 15:18^{xxv}). He sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus if He was the One or if he should look for another. Did John doubt what he heard and saw at the baptism?

22 And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead

are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. ²³ *And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.*” Luke 7:22-23 Jesus was reminding John of the declarations in the book of Isaiah of what the Messiah would do (Isaiah 35:5,6^{xxvi}). In other words, Jesus was telling John to trust the Word of God. Perhaps when John heard the answer he remembered how he had announced that Jesus was the Lamb of God who had come into the world to take away our sins. The Lamb had to be the sacrificial lamb like the many lambs throughout Israel’s history that foreshadowed what Jesus would do for us (Leviticus 17:11^{xxvii}). If that was the case, he could die in peace knowing that his sin of doubting what God had spoken over Jesus would soon be covered by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

²⁸ *and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother.* Mark 6:28 Herodias had her way. The man she so despised for calling out her sin was silenced, or was he? We are still talking about John’s declaration that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We are still going over Herodias conniving and heartless way she worked to get John killed. She did not even win in a worldly way. Only a few years later, the father of Herod’s divorced wife who was the King of Nabatea waged a successful war against Herod. A few years after that Herod and Herodias would be exiled to Gaul. We have no date for their deaths because they became insignificant.

²⁹ *When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.* Mark 6:29 The disciples of John requested and were granted the body of John. We do not know where he was buried. An excavation of a fifth century church in Bulgaria revealed a marble coffin in which were said to be a few of the bones of John the Baptist. The DNA was of a middle eastern man from the first century, but we cannot be certain if it was indeed John the Baptist’s bones.

Two lives and two paths are seen in this passage. Hughes describes the contrast in these two men: *Here John the Baptist and Herod Antipas met in perfect antithesis. John was austere and simple; Herod was flamboyant and ornate. John was righteous; Herod was a debauchee. John was a man of immense moral courage; Herod was a man who lived in spineless relativity. John was a man who kept his conscience and lost his head. Herod was a man who took John’s head and lost his own conscience. It was the story of the life and death of a conscience—of the death of a soul. This paradigm has been lived out thousands of times in this century as well as in preceding ages. It bears gracious instruction for those who will learn.*^{xxviii} Will we learn? Time marches on. We will all stand before God and give an account (Romans 14:12^{xxix}). However, it is not fear that should motivate us to let Christ become our Lord. He does not desire unwilling servants. His banner over us is love (Song of Songs 2:4^{xxx}). He wants us to know the love that sent Him to be the Lamb of God who takes our sins away, so that we would not perish. **Fear may bring us to prayer, but love should be what captures and motivates our hearts.** When you accept His forgiveness and know the price He paid for you to receive it, you cannot help but love Him. Love produces love. Love guides us into joyful service and away from destructive patterns and compromises. We love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19^{xxxi}). Two lives with two very different stories and two very different motivations. These two paths lie before us all (Romans 6:21^{xxxii}). Choose wisely.

Questions:

1. Review the background of John the Baptist.
2. Who did Herod and others think Jesus was? Why?
3. What did Jesus say about John the Baptist?
4. What might “today, tomorrow, and the third day” allude to?
5. What was Herod’s struggle?
6. What was his unguarded moment? Yours?
7. Review the symbolism of John seeing the lamb in The Chosen.
8. Why did John doubt?
9. Do you think they could have imagined how history would view them?
- 10 Review the contrast between them.

ⁱ **Luke 1:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

ⁱⁱ **Isaiah 40:3 (ESV)**

³ A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Leviticus 11:22 (ESV)**

²² Of them you may eat: the locust of any kind, the bald locust of any kind, the cricket of any kind, and the grasshopper of any kind.

^{iv} **Matthew 3:7 (NIV)**

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”

^v **Mark 8:27 (ESV)**

²⁷ And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”

^{vi} **2 Kings 2:9-10 (ESV)**

⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you.” And Elisha said, “Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me.”

¹⁰ And he said, “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you, but if you do not see me, it shall not be so.”

^{vii} **Malachi 4:5 (ESV)**

⁵ “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.

^{viii} **Matthew 11:13-14 (ESV)**

¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John,
¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.

^{ix} **2 Kings 2:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

^x **John 6:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

^{xi} **Luke 9:9 (ESV)**

⁹ Herod said, “John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?” And he sought to see him.

^{xii} **Luke 13:31-33 (ESV)**

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.”

³² And he said to them, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.

³³ Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.’

^{xiii} **Hosea 6:1-2 (ESV)**

¹ “Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.

² After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.

xiv **Matthew 12:40 (ESV)**

40 For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

xv **Ephesians 5:25 (ESV)**

25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

xvi **Ephesians 5:33 (ESV)**

33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

xvii **Galatians 5:17 (ESV)**

17 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

xviii **John 12:43 (ESV)**

43 for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

xix **1 John 3:1 (ESV)**

1 See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

xx **1 John 2:17 (ESV)**

17 And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

xxi **1 Chronicles 16:34 (ESV)**

34 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!

xxii

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1018084336550649&set=a.783864686639283&id=100050472760027>

xxiii **John 1:29 (ESV)**

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

xxiv **Revelation 11:15 (ESV)**

15 Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever."

xxv **Exodus 15:18 (ESV)**

18 The LORD will reign forever and ever."

xxvi **Isaiah 35:5-6 (ESV)**

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;

xxvii **Leviticus 17:11 (ESV)**

11 For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.

xxviii R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior*, vol. 1, Preaching the Word (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), 140.

xxix **Romans 14:12 (ESV)**

12 So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

xxx **Song of Songs 2:4 (ESV)**

4 He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.

xxxi **1 John 4:19 (ESV)**

19 We love because he first loved us.

xxxii **Romans 6:21 (ESV)**

21 But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.