

Herod Antipas: A Rash King

In the plainspoken New Testament letter called “James,” the writer contrasts two opposing ways to live (James



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3:13-18). The first way is marked by “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart,” warning “do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth” (v. 14 NASV). The positive approach to living is marked by “wisdom from above (which is) first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy” (v. 17 NASV). Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee by Roman appointment, was driven by ambition, crippled by a childhood of fear and violence, and utterly selfish. The finger of “don’t be like that man” points straight at Herod Antipas.

You remember Herod Antipas’ father, Herod the Great, who killed three of Antipas’ brothers, his mother and grandmother. Add to that list the infants of Bethlehem his father had ordered killed because one of them was destined to be “King of the Jews.” The story of Herod Antipas is a dark tragedy, like so many in history, that multiplied suffering and evil through political power spawned by egotism. The dark drama begins in Matthew 11 when John the Baptizer is locked away in Herod’s prison and sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” (Matt. 11:3). John knows that being in any Herod’s prison never ends well and he wants to clearly know before he dies that Jesus is the Messiah. In that situation we would expect Jesus to miraculously free John, but such was not the case! You may remember that John had publicly stated to his own disciples, “(Jesus) must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Jesus’ answer to John’s disciples is powerful and clear: the blind receive their sight, the crippled walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the poor receive God’s good news (Matt. 11:2-5). Jesus went on to announce to the crowds that John is in fact the “promised Elijah who was to come” (Matt. 11:4, referring to Malachi 4:5).

There are no positive stories about

the Herods. John the Baptizer was calling Israel to God’s Messiah, to a day of ultimate hope, so he spoke plainly, knowing his future was in danger. Jesus’ words identify John’s place in God’s plan for our salvation: “No one who has ever been born is greater than John the Baptizer” (Matt. 11:11). This story reads like a soap opera. Herod Antipas, his half-brother Philip, and their wives had traveled to Rome, where Antipas and his brother’s wife, Herodias, had an affair. Both couples divorced and Antipas and Herodias married. John publicly condemned this as adultery (Luke 18:16). Although Herod Antipas feared the influence of John with the people, he silenced the “prophet” by locking him in prison. One can only imagine the fury of Herodias and Herod’s fear of appearing weak to the public.

You can guess the theme of next week’s show. It is Herod’s birthday, the palace is crowded, the whispers are audible, the wine is flowing, and Herodias’ daughter dances for Herod. Herod, basking in the attention, makes a grandiose promise to his lovely stepdaughter; “Anything you want is yours!” Do you sense a setup? Herod is trapped in his own careless offer and Herodias seizes the moment to permanently shut John’s mouth. I wonder how that crowd of notables reacted to the sight of John’s head carried on a platter to Herodias by her daughter?

We can formulate all kinds of simplistic moral statements about immoral power, political intrigue, absolute selfishness and the spiritual darkness of this world. All true, but this tragic story clearly points to the world’s absolute need for God’s love, forgiveness and power to change the human heart. In our world there will always be horrible stories of cruelty and death, but in Christ there is an alternative because of Jesus. John’s disciples claimed the body of their beloved teacher and Jesus moved closer to the cross. There are many significant stories in the four gospels, but each one takes its meaning from Jesus’ words and actions.

In Matthew’s telling of “the gospel,” the next story depicts Jesus briefly retreating to a lonely place, perhaps to grieve and find God’s comfort, the reaching out to a hungry crowd of over five thousand people (Matt. 14:13-21).

Formations

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Scripture: Matthew 14:1-12

We move from a scene of tragic violence to a picture of Jesus’ compassion for a multitude that had never seen the inside of a palace or enjoyed a life of power and wealth. The world promotes power and success, which never results in peace of mind or happiness. Jesus offers us wholeness for our broken hearts, forgiveness for our selfish thinking and hope for our fears. Would you rather have an invitation to Herod’s birthday party or to the picnic hosted by Jesus on that hillside in northern Galilee?

Herod’s story can remind us that we are never locked into a predestined fate. We make choices every day. Some people have better circumstances. But the gospel of grace is not about becoming successful, wealthy, or immune to life. Herod “had it all” but actually had nothing in the end. I have known people with amazing stories: a man who hit bottom with less than a dollar to his name and became a millionaire who served God with all he had; a woman who grew up in poverty and anger, who became a loving children’s Sunday School teacher; a man who came home to very little after WWII and became a mentor to troubled teens; a woman who grew from the loneliness of an orphanage to be a mother of beautiful daughters who have passed their faith on to a new generation. My point is not to dwell on Herod’s tragic life as a warning of destruction, but to remind us all that in Christ there are beautiful and powerful life options beyond circumstances and tragic influences.

What we believe shapes us, our children and probably those we encounter daily. Think about your challenges and choices, considering that your decisions will impact others. It is not easy to overcome fear and negative situations, but the grace of God offers possibilities, recovery and a better way. Jesus said, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28 NASV).

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.