

3rd Sunday in Lent
"I, Herod"
Luke 23:1-12
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Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church
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This morning, we continue our countdown to Calvary by observing our NEXT personality surrounding Christ's Passion- Herod Antipas, who is often mistaken for his father- Herod the Great. Herod the Great was a ruthless, conniving king who had his wife and three of his sons killed. He was also the one responsible for slaying the children of Bethlehem in an effort to destroy the infant Jesus. He died not long after Jesus was born. Herod Antipas was the SON of Herod the Great and was not much better than his father. He wasn't a king in the same sense that his father was, that is, as an absolute monarch. When Herod the Great died, his kingdom was divided among his sons into four parts of which Herod Antipas was given the region around Galilee and Perea, an area he ruled for close to 43 years- from 4 B.C. to 39 A.D. Therefore, throughout Jesus's life, Herod Antipas was the ONLY king he had ever known.

Now why was Jesus sent to Herod? The Sanhedrin--the Jewish Supreme Court--had convicted him of blasphemy and sentenced him to death. However, as the Jews did not have the authority to actually execute someone, he was sent to Pontius Pilate--the Roman Governor--who ALONE possessed that authority. They knew that Pilate would never execute a man on the single charge of blasphemy for there was not a more idolatrous and blasphemous religion in all the WORLD than the one practiced by the Romans who had a multiplicity of gods for EVERYTHING. Therefore, rather than charging him with violating Jewish law, they would have to convince Pilate that he was a dangerous revolutionary intent on overthrowing the forces of Rome- the GREATEST crime one could commit against the empire. Thus, they assert that Jesus was anti-tax, anti-Caesar, anti-Rome, and GRAVEST OF ALL, that he was trying to set himself up as a king in opposition to the emperor- all LIES, every one of them.

However, as we'll see next week when we put PILATE in the witness seat, he RUINS their plans by declaring Jesus INNOCENT OF ALL CHARGES. Yet, feeling strong pressure from the Jews to find him GUILTY, Pilate seeks to worm his way out of his dilemma. He learns that Herod Antipas, a man he had had a long-standing feud with, is in Jerusalem for the high holy days. Knowing that Jesus is a Galilean, he decides to transfer Jesus from the jurisdiction of the area he was arrested in, Jerusalem of Judea, to the jurisdiction of Jesus's home, Nazareth, and his primary place of ministry, Galilee. Pilate reasons that since Jesus was from the north country, what BETTER person to try Jesus than the RULER of that north country- HEROD. Therefore, he uses a political maneuver by transferring him over to Herod.

Now it's important for us to understand just what kind of man Herod Antipas was. In a marriage of political convenience, Herod married the daughter of an Arab king so he might build an alliance with them and consolidate his power in the region. But while staying with his half-brother, Herod Philip, Antipas fell passionately in love with Philip's wife, Herodias. She subsequently left her husband for Antipas who sent HIS first wife, the daughter of the Arab king, away. Well, Antipas went on to marry Herodias who was not only his sister-in-law, but also his niece. The Arab king never forgave the injury done to his daughter and some years later, inflicted an overwhelming defeat on Herod's armies.

At this time, John the Baptist had become the most popular preacher throughout the region, saving his most SCATHING rhetoric for the adulterous and incestuous marriage between Herod and Herodias. OUTRAGED over this, Herodias had John locked up in her husband's dark prison called Machaerus where she determined ONCE AND FOR ALL to have him killed. In Mark's gospel, we're told that Herod, knowing John to be a just and holy man, FEARED him and even liked to HEAR HIM PREACH from time to time. This tells us that Herod was not yet a COMPLETE reprobate, that he still possessed SOME degree of conscience, some awareness of right and wrong. It seemed he was fascinated by John's authority and power, something HE HIMSELF greatly lacked. At heart, Herod was a WEAK man who was dominated by sensuality and lust, by pride and selfishness and greed.

The opportunity to kill John came during a dinner party hosted by Herod when Salome-- Herodias's daughter from a previous marriage--gave quite a sensuous performance. While drunk, he offered Salome any wish she so desired- as much as half his kingdom. Herodias persuaded her daughter to demand that John's head be delivered to her and Herod, not wanting to embarrass himself before his guests, gave in to her demand. Hence, the Baptist was quickly executed. We're told that Herod wound up regretting his decision and even grieved over his death but you can bet that any grief he may have felt was neither deep nor lasting.

When Jesus is brought before him for the very first time, Herod is initially fearful that it is John the Baptist come back from the dead. But when he sees that it's Jesus INSTEAD, he's not only relieved- he seems DELIGHTED. He had heard of Jesus and his great wonder-working abilities and so it wasn't his TEACHINGS he was interested in but rather his MIRACLES. He didn't want TRUTH- he wanted to be ENTERTAINED like SO MANY of the crowds that followed Jesus. Regarding, him as nothing more than a street magician, Herod demands that Jesus put on a private show for him.

But Jesus REFUSES to amuse him, choosing instead to IGNORE him- this king who had already put his cousin to death and soon would see the SAME done to HIM. Herod, uninterested in any of the charges the Jews brought against him, continues to question Jesus as to where he was from and where he got his mysterious powers. It seems the more he demands answers from him, the more determined Jesus is in NOT ANSWERING any of them. Earlier, Jesus had warned his disciples: "Do not give dogs what is holy; do not throw your pearls before swine: they will only trample on them, and turn and tear you to pieces." The chief priests and the scribes became more agitated, and their voices grew louder and more hostile. Still, Jesus said nothing, knowing that anything he DID say would not change an outcome which had ALREADY been decided upon- he was going to die and he KNEW it.

Well, seeing no miracles from this man, Herod finally gives up. Since Jesus was refusing to entertain him, he'd entertain himself at Jesus's expense. As Jesus had claimed to be a king, the very title HE HIMSELF most coveted, he would then make a king out of HIM. Ordering a regal robe to be draped around his shoulders, he made Jesus look the part and then sent him back to Pilate, confident that Pilate would see the humor of it. Verse 12 tells us, "Now Herod and Pilate became friends with one another that very day; for before they had been at enmity with each other." What we see here is how the cross of Christ not only UNITED his friends, it united his ENEMIES AS WELL. In the trial and death of this poor Galilean, the religion of the Jews and the pagan forces of Rome come together to destroy a common enemy- Jesus of Nazareth; human beings had never sunk so low as it had in that hour.

Well, what does this text have to say to us this morning? What can we learn from Herod Antipas or people LIKE him? Herod is a man to be most pitied- there are many like him in this world and that may include OURSELVES, as WELL. He was born with every possible advantage- he was raised in privilege, handsome like so many of the Herods were, and educated at the finest schools where he was trained to be a leader of men. INSTEAD, he used his position, his power, and his great wealth to satisfy his own lustful pleasures. Cruel, shallow-minded, and hopelessly weak, he used every advantage he had to serve his OWN purposes rather than to help or serve the people he governed.

History abounds with people like Herod Antipas- persons who are venal, corrupt, and power-hungry. It is during such times, periods often marked by cruel oppression, that God will raise up someone—even as he did John the Baptist and the prophets in the Old Testament—to speak truth to power and confront their corrupt regime. For instance, there's the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer whose principled resistance to Hitler's regime inspired OTHER great modern leaders including Martin Luther King and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

In the late 1930's, with war looming, Bonhoeffer had an opportunity to escape Germany for America where a teaching post had been created specifically for him. He set sail in June 1939 and yet not long after he arrived here, he realized how he could not be absent from his own country during a time of war. Within two weeks, he was already taking the boat back to Germany. As he expressed in a letter to the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr:

I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people... Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security.

When war DID break out, Bonhoeffer found himself drawn into the circle of those patriotic Germans who sought to overthrow Hitler. As the war went on, he grew increasingly aware of the horrors the Third Reich was unleashing and reluctantly concluded that the assassination of Hitler would be the lesser of evils. In 1943, he was arrested and imprisoned and then on April 9th, 1945, just two weeks before the camp was liberated, he was hanged. His last recorded words were, 'This is the end – for me, the beginning of life.'

In August of 1983, I was the only full-time minister in Northern California's Redwood National Park where I served as the pastor of a small local church. Much of the news that month was focused on the Philippines and its military dictator, Ferdinand Marcos- a ruthless ruler who governed that nation with an iron fist over the course of several decades. Benigno Aquino, a reformed-minded senator and Marcos's greatest critic, was bent on seeing democracy restored in his country. For being so outspoken he spent almost eight years in solitary confinement and at one point was even sentenced to death, saved only by the international outcry his sentence had provoked. Requiring major heart surgery and not trusting any of the doctors in his own country, Marcos allowed him to have it in America, thinking he had finally gotten rid of him for good. Instead, Aquino continued to write and lecture about the corruption back in his homeland with greater fervor. When reports about the deterioration of Marcos's health grew, he--just as Bonhoeffer had forty-five years earlier--resolved he had to return.

Throughout those months, I had developed a special interest in his situation and on Sunday, August 21st, Aquino made his dramatic return to the Philippines with the world's press in tow. I remember thinking about it that whole morning and even praying for his safety during my pastoral prayer. But when I got home following the service, I was shocked to learn how an hour earlier, immediately upon deboarding his plane at the Manila airport, he was shot in the head and killed by a member of the Filipino military, no doubt on Marcos's orders. Aquino understood the risks involved by returning to his homeland, but he felt that more important than his OWN life was the welfare of his PEOPLE. He said in a fateful interview given shortly before his plane landed, "I have returned on my free will to join the ranks of those struggling to restore our rights and freedoms through non-violence. I seek no confrontation."

Benigno Aquino, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer before him, was a devout Christian who believed that his life was completely in God's hands and therefore he was not afraid to die on behalf of a cause much greater than his own life. During his years of imprisonment, he read the book *Born Again* by convicted Watergate conspirator Chuck Colson which had inspired him. Through it, he realized how God uses our sufferings that we might understand his presence and experience his grace which we might otherwise become oblivious to. In the sufferings of Jesus, he had discovered one who was a real brother. His assassination galvanized the Filipino people and it eventually led to Marcos being deposed and Aquino's wife, Cory, becoming the new democratically-elected President of that small island nation.

One last figure I want to highlight is the example of Alexei Navalny, the outspoken Russian politician and activist who was murdered by Vladimir Putin and laid to rest in Moscow only two days ago. Despite being poisoned twice and repeatedly punished with long bouts of isolation in remote prisons, Navalny stood unbroken. He continued to mock Putin, denouncing his boundless corruption and the invasion of Ukraine which made him a Kremlin nightmare. After being exiled to Germany with his family, he made the surprise decision in January, 2021 to return to Russia, knowing full-well he would be arrested and possibly even killed. By doing so, he became a hero to the Russian people, demonstrating what real faith and moral courage looked like. He was not afraid to speak the truth to power, but he wanted to do so inside Russia, where ordinary Russians could hear him. He had become the most popular figure in that country, having organized a number of anti-government protests over the years and boasting millions of followers on You Tube. The moment his feet touched Russian soil, he was AGAIN arrested and THIS time sentenced to a long prison term in an arctic gulag where it was thought no one would find or hear from him ever again.

And do you know where Alexei Navalny's relentless courage CAME FROM? As from Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Benigno Aquino, from out of his DEEP CHRISTIAN FAITH. As he explained at his 2021 trial, his religious beliefs were at the heart of his political commitments. "If you want, I'll tell you about God and salvation," he told the judge:

I'll turn up the volume of heartbreak to the maximum, so to speak. The fact is that I am a Christian, which usually rather sets me up as an example for constant ridicule in the Anti-Corruption Foundation, because mostly our people are atheists, and I was once quite a militant atheist myself. But now I am a believer, and that helps me a lot in my activities, because everything becomes much, much easier...As Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied." I've always thought that this particular commandment is more or less an instruction to activity. And so, while certainly not really

enjoying the place where I am, I have no regrets about coming back or about what I'm doing. It's fine, because I did the right thing. On the contrary, I feel a real kind of satisfaction because at some difficult moment I did as required by the instructions, and did not betray the commandment.

Adolph Hitler, Ferdinand Marcos, and Vladimir Putin- all modern-day Herods. Each, in his own way, feigned Christian religiosity. They, pretended to be defenders of the faith when in fact they merely USED the Church to further their OWN ends. They portrayed themselves as heroic champions of Christian civilization when IN REALITY, each was just another soulless dictator in a long line of corrupt tyrants. However, in the same way that God raised up John the Baptist to confront Herod and the prophets of old against the kings of their own country, God raised up a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Benigno Aquino, and an Alexei Navalny to confront THEIR leaders- men of conscience spurred by their own Christian faith. When I look at them, I see FOUR COMMON TRAITS: FIRST, their faith was displayed in DOING. They could have remained in the relative safety of their jobs or in the security of some distant land but instead, they were aware of a responsibility they knew they could not escape. Each of them understood that Christianity had to be lived out and to be a disciple of Christ was to DO something. As that great reformer and founder of Protestantism Martin Luther said before that Catholic tribunal at the Diet of Worms, "Here I stand; I can DO no other!" SECOND, their faith entailed tremendous risks. They all knew that at any moment they could be arrested, imprisoned and EVEN KILLED and yet they remained undaunted and undeterred. THIRD, their faith was displayed through their defiance. Faced with a threatening government and a church that remained silent, they were courageous enough to speak boldly AGAINST THEM BOTH. And FINALLY, their faith equipped them with the courage to LAY DOWN THEIR LIVES if it came to that. They knew there had to be some values and truths in this world worth dying for or their lives would forever remain shallow and their faith, an empty sham. As Bonhoeffer put it in his classic work *The Cost of Discipleship*, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Friends, as we continue our journey to Jerusalem throughout this season of Lent, stopping to review the various persons Christ met along the road to his cross, may we pause from many of our mindless and ceaseless activities to look deep within our OWN hearts. The Church as the Body of Christ is NO LESS called to serve as the "conscience of our culture" which means that EACH OF US is ALSO called at different times to take a difficult stand. It may not be easy nor the popular thing to do, and yet we all need to search our OWN souls and like these Christian saints who I referenced this morning, do the RIGHT THING. By spending more time in God's Word, his Holy Scriptures, and by seeking moments of quiet prayer and deep reflection, especially upon those scenes that figured so prominently in our Lord's Passion, we just might hear with a bit more clarity the voice of God's Spirit calling US to a profounder, more intimate life with himself, and in the process become a CLEARER AND MORE COURAGEOUS WITNESS to Jesus Christ himself. For if we DON'T, we run the risk of OUR lives becoming emptier and shallower, lives more complacent and self-satisfied, lives that eventually become more sensual and blind to his truth like one Herod Antipas. Let us pray...

O God of the still, small voice, please quiet our inner spirit. There are so many other voices competing for our attention yet we know that yours is the only TRUE one. Help stem all the other distractions in our lives that we might focus exclusively on you and more clearly hear your voice within. As we listen and obey your Word, may Christ become a more real presence that others may recognize you in and through our very lives. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.