

## Opening

- This is week three of our six-week series “Uncensored” - a series covering some rather sordid stories found in the Bible.
  - o This series offers us an opportunity to examine biblical stories which don’t always get a lot coverage from the pulpit.
  - o They are stories that present topics which can be uncomfortable to talk about.
    - Topics we may prefer to sweep under the rug, so to speak.
  - o Sandra has done a great job with the first two stories and it is good to examine difficult topics, because they offer an opportunity to learn something about ourselves and our faith.
    - In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, we examined the importance of hospitality as an expression of our faith and how that might shape the way we welcome strangers.
    - Then last week, in the story of Lot’s daughters, we were reminded that people get caught in situations of desperation, where they are forced to choose between the lesser of two awful things and that God is always working to bring about goodness, even in the midst of awful situations.
- After hearing these first two extraordinary biblical stories, I was expecting that the sordid story about the death of John the Baptist might be a small retreat from outrageous calamity!
  - o But it was not to be- we’re not getting off lightly today.

## Dallas

- How many of you remember “Dallas”, the popular TV show produced in the 80’s?
  - o During its 14-year run on television, Dallas was one of the most popular prime-time soap operas.
  - o The show revolved around the Ewing’s - a wealthy and usually feuding Texas family.
  - o One of the things that made the show popular, was how each episode ended with a cliffhanger.

- Can anyone remember “who shot JR”?
- The undercurrent of the show was “family against family” with members “at war” with one another, concocting schemes and dirty business deals by one family member to undercut another.
  - It was a very sordid show, with plenty of fighting, extra-marital affairs, illegitimate children, bribery and blackmail.

### **Real-life soap opera of Herod**

- Yet, the outrageous and shocking behavior portrayed in that fictional show, pales in comparison to the real-life soap opera, surrounding the death of John the Baptist.
- Let’s begin with the scripture, where this story is already unfolding.

### **[Read Mark 6:14-29]**

- As this story begins, King Herod Antipas is fretting about John the Baptist.
  - He’s worried that his efforts to silence John have failed.
  - By this time, news of Jesus had permeated throughout the country and tales of Jesus had reached Herod.
  - Herod heard others say that John had been raised from the dead and he’s wrestling with guilt, over the fact that it is he who allowed the execution of John the Baptist.
    - And now he’s haunted by what he’s done.
- Herod had arrested John and had him thrown into prison.
  - And just why did he have John arrested?
  - One reason is because John’s voice had gained a large audience and John had become too popular for Herod’s comfort
  - Another reason Herod had John executed, was because he wanted to silence the truth.
    - John had made a truthful, yet ill-timed rebuke of Herod, over Herod’s marriage to his brother Phillip’s wife Herodias.
    - While visiting his brother in Rome, Herod seduced Herodias, his brother’s wife and persuaded her to leave his brother and marry him.
    - And in order to do so, he had to put away his own wife.
    - Putting aside the moral aspect of what he did, Herod broke two Jewish laws.

- He divorced his own wife without cause, and he married his sister-in-law, which under Jewish law, was prohibited.
- And without hesitation, John rebuked him.
- And it's a dangerous thing to rebuke a tyrant.

### **A tangled web**

- Now upon closer examination, the interconnectedness between Herod, his brother and Herodias, gets even more "interesting" shall we say.
  - You see Herodias was the daughter of another of Herod's step-brothers, Aristobulus.
  - Thus, Herod's brother Phillip had married his step-brother's daughter and therefore his niece.
  - Thus, Herod Antipas had seduced and married the daughter of his step brother, the wife of another step-brother and his niece.
- Are you having trouble keeping up with any of this, like I am?
  - And it's worse, but we don't have that much time, so we'll just leave it by saying that the Herod family tree was a very tangled web.
- And John called Herod out on this.
  - Herod imprisoned John because John criticized Herod for marrying his brother's wife.
    - Herod was a little upset, but his wife, Herodias, was much more upset!
    - Silencing John, wasn't enough for Herodias.
      - She wanted to kill him!
    - Yet, in verse 20 of Mark's Gospel we hear that Herod "protected" John.
    - Mark tells us that Herod protected John, because he liked hearing John talk.
      - Though he dreaded what John might say, he was intrigued by John.
      - Herod saw in John something good, holy and true.
    - It seems plausible that Herod may have imprisoned John, just to keep him away from his vengeful, wicked queen.

## Herod throws a party

- Then, one day King Herod throws himself a big birthday party.
  - o He invites his friends and flatterers, people he needs to impress.
  - o His step-daughter- a child of Herodias's marriage to Phillip- does a dance for the King.
  - o Now, if you think this was the same sort of dance we heard about in the 2 Samuel reading this morning, when King David danced for God, as he was bringing the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem, you might re-think that.
    - The dance David offered to God was a dance of praise and thanksgiving.
      - David wanted to honor God- his dance was to please God.
  - o Knowing the character of Herod, it isn't too difficult to imagine what sort of dance it was that pleased him?
    - Can you envision, this middle-aged man, leering at this young princess, as she performs her sultry, shameless and provocative dance?
    - Whatever it was, I'm confident that the performance by the princess, was something no father or uncle, should ever see, or ever approve.
  - o But the dance delighted Herod and he told the girl how wonderful she was.
  - o Herod applauds louder than anyone and he sputters out a promise to give the young girl anything she wants- up to half of his kingdom.
- The young girl goes to her mother Herodias, for advice.
  - o What should she ask for?
  - o For her ruthless mother, the answer was easy- ask for John's head
  - o And her daughter did just that, adding some of her own ruthlessness- asking for John's head on a platter!
- Herod was horrified at the request, but he was trapped.
  - o All of the important people were at that banquet
    - And they had heard his offer and the daughter's request.
  - o Herod found himself between a rock and a hard place.
    - He didn't want to kill John, but he felt the need to save face in front of his guests.

- He didn't have the courage to admit his folly and so he silenced his conscience.
- He had John murdered and his head brought to the princess.

### **What are we to make of this?**

- Wow, what are we to make of this sordid and extreme story?
  - And why would the author of Mark's Gospel find it important to include this story here?
  - What nuggets of truth and wisdom can we glean from this story and perhaps apply to our faith journey?
- Well for starters there is John the Baptist himself.
  - John's life counted for something.
    - Though he died thousands of years ago, he is still remembered as a man of courage, in pursuit of truth.
    - He put himself in God's hands, went where God told him to go, did what God told him to do and said what God told him to say.
    - He lived for the truth and he died for it.
  - Those who bring the voice of God to others, ought to act with conscience.
    - And John is a good example for us as believers to follow.
    - Perhaps we can look at it this way- would you rather be remembered in the way John is remembered, or in the way Herod is remembered?
- Another truth found in this story, is that the voice of God cannot be silenced.
  - Herod thought that by imprisoning and ultimately killing John he would silence the voice of one who speaks for God.
    - But that didn't work.
    - The King kept hearing things about John- and about Jesus- and about his disciples.
    - He heard others say "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason, these powers are at work in him."
    - Hearing these things, Herod knew that his plan to silence the truth had failed.

- Still another truth in this story is that even in the midst of the most disturbing circumstances, we can have confidence that God is still at work.
  - As disturbing as it is, the story of John the Baptist is but a piece of a much bigger story in the Gospel of Mark.
  - Sandwiched immediately around this story is the story of Jesus sending out his disciples, two-by-two and of their work in the mission field.
  - While John was in prison, Jesus and his disciples are out and about, casting out demons, healing the sick, teaching, feeding the multitudes and calling people to repentance.
    - As John was being put to death, God was there- making sure that evil would not win.
    - Sure, a good man was being murdered, yet still, hundreds more were being saved.
  - That thought must have been a welcomed message for the church under persecution, during Mark's time.
    - Christians were being imprisoned—even killed—not because they had done something wrong, but because they too had spoken the truth.
    - And I suspect Mark inserted this story, in the middle of a broader narrative- the narrative of a greater good- to provide the assurance that all was well.
      - Yes, bad things were happening, but God was still at work in the world.
  - I think we modern-day Christians are well served by that message too.
    - Just as life was difficult for Christians in Mark's day, it can be difficult for us as well.
    - We live in extraordinary challenging times, in a dangerous world.
- This story - sandwiched between the stories of Jesus and his apostles, encourages us to walk strongly in faith.
  - To not lose hope even in the midst of the most terrible circumstances, because God is not finished.
  - Those who do good and who do right things won't be protected from being hurt.

- Those who proclaim the truth of God's word will face opposition- John was no exception and neither are we.
  - The story of John the Baptist's death is meant to shock us out of our complacency.
  - We are called on to confront the evil we see around us.
- So, we have a choice-be like John or be like Herod.
    - Do we want to be remembered as someone like Herod- weak, easy tempted and manipulated?
    - Or do we want to be remembered as one who remained strong in our moral convictions- seeking justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God?
  - In his telling of the death of John the Baptist, Mark invites us to choose a faith of significance, by following Jesus on his way.
  - Let us walk with that sort of faith this day and every day. Amen