

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Luke 23:4-12

Sermon Title: "Magic Tricks and Big Expectations" (The Supporting Cast of Lent: Herod)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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Herod. Not King Herod the Great from the time of Jesus' birth. He has been dead for quite some time. The Herod we talk about is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and the tetrarch, or the co-emperor, overseeing the region of Galilee.¹

The first time we run into this Herod is in Mark 6, when he arrests John the Baptist for speaking out against his marriage to Herodias, Herod's niece and wife to his half-brother Phillip.² Herod commits several gross violations against God in going forth with this marriage, and so he has John locked up to shut him up. Herod's lust reaches far, because he soon sets his eyes on Herodias's daughter, and he means to have her as he had Philip's wife. On his birthday, Herodias's daughter comes into the court, dancing and prancing so that Herod become acutely aware of her presence; and because he is so enamored with her, he pledges anything to her. Herodias's daughter speaks to her mother, and both request the head of John the

¹ *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, 387.

² Cf. Mark 6:14-29.

Baptist on a plate. Surprisingly, Herod is saddened by this request, because he feared John as a holy man, but a pledge is a pledge. He does exactly as Herodias's daughter wants, because lust trumps human life.

So we are talking about that Herod, a rich ruler who has a wandering eye, who is easily swayed, who doesn't seem to rule with an iron fist like his father before him but rules with a laid-back, irresponsible attitude.

I personally believe that the best portrayal of Herod comes from the movie, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. If you can remember the movie, Herod is a portly guy with sun-red skin, rectangular yellow glasses, and wild frizzy hair. He sings as a high tenor, and he seems to be an amiable gentleman: everybody's friend, the life of the party. Jesus comes before him (because Pilate doesn't want to deal with Jesus and passes the buck), but Herod is overjoyed to see this great man. Luke says in his Gospel that Herod has been dying to meet Jesus, because his famous reputation precedes him.³

And what does Herod want from Jesus? He wants a show. He wants magic tricks to entertain him and the guests surrounding him. Isn't this what Jesus is known for? Multiplying fish, walking on water, healing a child or two? Herod wants to see tricks, so he can

³ Luke 23:8.

become even more fascinate with Jesus. In the movie, Herod sings this little number: “If you are the Christ, yes, the great Jesus Christ, prove to me that your divine, turn my water into wine, that’s all you need do then I know it’s all true, Come on, King of the Jews.”

It is a silly song – the dance that goes along with the song is even sillier. So is Herod’s request. He has standing before him the Savior of the world, the long-awaited Messiah, God in the flesh; and what he wants are parlor tricks. Jesus is a spectacle, and nobody to be taking seriously, according to Herod.

Jesus does not bend to his request, not in the movie and not in Luke’s Gospel. Herod asks Jesus a bunch of questions, and Jesus answers none of them. He knows the whole scene is a farce, and he will not participate. Herod mocks him, and the chief priest and scribes standing nearby mock Jesus, too. Herod gives him a luxurious robe to further tease him, and then kicks him out of his court.

People, even today, treat Jesus as Somebody who can do something for them, as long as it is the thing they want to have done. Jesus can be our Lord and Savior, as long as he is the kind of Lord and Savior that bows to our whims, that answers all our prayers to our satisfaction, a Savior we can easily mold and shape. It isn’t just the scientists and philosophers

who question the power of God – it may even be Christians who go to church every day who question God.

This usually occurs when something goes wrong. A person loses a job, or financial stress hits a family hard, or a person contracts a terminal illness, or a relationship falls apart. Everything is roses and sunshine when we have the money, when we feel loved and love back, when we can get up from our seats and go somewhere in the car. Our relationship with God is all roses and sunshine too, and we are so happy to be the people God has made us to be. And then the problems arise. Then the crisis hits. Obviously we are sad or mad about the situation – we never planned for such disasters. We become so angry, though, that we may begin to blame God. We hold God responsible for not keeping us from disaster. God fails to keep the roses fresh and the sun shining every day.

We may even say to God, “Where are you? Why aren’t you helping me? Why aren’t you answering prayers? Work your magic again. Turn everything back to the way it was, so I can be happy. And if I am not happy anymore, then I won’t believe in you anymore.” We might tell God this directly, but we act this way. We don’t pray as often. We don’t attend church or Life Groups or Sunday School as often, because God has not work his magic. He has not done

what we want him to do, as though we have the right to dictate to God what God should do. Like Herod, we want nothing to do with our Lord and Savior, if he won't perform for us.

Life is better, when everything is working out for us. Life is better, when God seems to be keeping us from any disaster. Yet, Christ did not come into the world to keep us from disaster. He came to save us from the disaster we are already in. Christ came to walk with us through any and every problem that arises, as well as to walk with us when everything seems to go smoothly. And when disaster arises – and they will arise, as long as we are residents of this world – Christ doesn't work magic by pulling a rabbit out of a hat to make us laugh and smile. Christ walks with us, Christ talks with us, and Christ reminds us that in thick and thin we still belong to God.

Every time I visit somebody in the hospital, who is diagnosed with cancer, I wish I could say Abracadabra and *poof!* the cancer would be gone. I wish I could say a special prayer, or pray long enough, and the disease would vanish into thin air. Some fancy parlor tricks are what I desire, and yet the Savior of the world never performed parlor tricks for anybody, not even in front of all-important Herod Antipas. My prayer is that the people may be healed, but also my prayer is that they

might be healed spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. I pray the person never loses faith in God, no matter what procedure or pain they experience. I pray family from far and near would come to visit the sick person, and that bonds of love would grow stronger. I pray the person might find moments to mend old hurts, especially with children and spouses. When people are sick and loved ones are feeling sorry for those who are sick, it is a great time for everybody to let down their defenses and allow forgiveness to enter in. It is a good opportunity to heal completely, spiritually, mentally, physically.

When things go bad for us, it is not the time to look for magic tricks. It's time to draw closer to God, to listen to God and discover what we should be doing, and fulfill God's will as loving, obedient disciples of Christ.

Herod sat on his throne, looking for Christ to perform for him. It is interesting to watch how Herod acted before Jesus. He acted like the all-important person in the room. He is a co-emperor in the vast Roman Empire. His father was once the King of the Jews, who built great buildings and monuments for the nation. But Herod sat before Jesus Christ himself, God incarnate, the King of the universe; and he had no decency to bow before him. Herod had no honor and

respect for Holiness and Majesty, standing right in front of him. Herod took on an arrogant posture, and demanded something from Jesus.

Herod had no right – and nobody has any right – to demand anything from Jesus. He is God incarnate, the Son of the Most High God, the Savior and Lord of the universe, and in every way we should bow before him. We should listen for what he wants us to do, and then act without hesitation, without question.

Every time we open the Bible, the words should explode in our faces like dynamite, because we are always confronted with Christ's demands on our lives. Just start with the Sermon of the Mount in Matthew 5. Jesus tells us to be the salt of the world, and to never hide our light under a bushel or anything. Jesus doesn't suggest this – he tell us straight out to do it, and we must obey. Jesus tells us to never commit murder, not with any weapon and not with our hearts. Never call anybody a fool, or we are in danger of hell's fires. Pluck out an eye and cut off a hand, if they cause you to sin. Always go the extra mile for somebody, when they walk more than a mile. Give another article of clothing to somebody, when they take clothing from you.

And if that isn't enough, Jesus says to us that we must take up our crosses and follow him. We must deny ourselves of anything: parents, spouses, children,

possessions, and even our own lives. If we want to save our lives, we have to give up our lives: our dreams, our plans, our very existence, everything – and follow him exclusively. Without Jesus we are nothing, and so we must follow him to the ends of the earth.

Now, how are we doing in those departments? Not so well. We may believe Jesus is our Lord and Savior, but we have a hard time every day doing exactly as he commands. C.S. Lewis said in our Lenten devotionals that “we are not merely imperfect creatures who must be improved: we are... rebels who must lay down or [weapons].”⁴ Do we have any right to dictate to Jesus what he should be doing for us, when we fail to do what he expects of us, lay down our sin and follow him?

Only Jesus Christ is Lord and Master of our lives, and our Lord and Master showed us how to live by taking off the sandals of his disciples, and washing their feet from the day’s travels through mud and muck. Our Lord and Master visited homes and healed people of all kinds of diseases. He fed people, taught them God’s ways, he listened to their problems, and then he died for everybody. We cannot die for the sins of others, but we can be less dictatorial toward Christ

⁴ *A Clean Heart Create in Me: Daily Lenten Reflections from C.S. Lewis* (Creative Communications for the Parish), 10.

when things aren't going well. We can be less accusatory and less arrogant toward God, when all the roses are not in bloom and the sun is not shining as brightly as we expect.

God isn't going to perform some miracle for our entertainment. God isn't going to grant every wish, as though he is obligated to make us happy all the time. Neither does God expect us to perform miracles and achieve the impossible in order to receive his salvation. That is why Christ died for us: to achieve the impossible, to give us the chance to accept his free gift of life which we could never reach on our own. That is a great trick, you know, and one that will save our lives forever.

To us Christians, Jesus Christ is the most important Person in the universe. We give him room in our hearts, and influence in our lives, and believe we can do nothing – we would *be* nothing – without him.⁵ Every day, we read the words of our Savior in the Bible and do what we can, always with God's help. We don't see our obedience to God as drudgery but as a gift we happily receive and grateful carry out. And when we accomplish God's will from time to time, we see great things happen in us and in others.

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, cf. 291.

Oh, if only Herod had truly believed Jesus was and is the Christ, the Messiah, then he too would have seen greater things of God.