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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Amos 7:7-15, Ephesians 1:3-14, Mark 6:14-29
Almost Persuaded

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Roman ruler of Galilee in the days of Jesus was Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great – that cruel king who ordered the massacre of the innocent boys of Bethlehem back when Jesus was an infant. Herod Antipas, like his father, was a cruel man, as we see in today’s story about the beheading of John the Baptist. But the Bible cherishes the truth and so gives credit where credit is due. Herod Antipas, like many of us, was a mixture of good and bad. There are some good things to be said about the man, and in this sermon I mean to try to lift up his virtues. But also, there are some bad things to say about the man.¹ Let’s begin with the suggestions of goodness in the character of Herod Antipas. My text is from this morning’s Gospel, from Mark 6. It begins by speaking of Herod’s wife, Herodias:

¹⁹And Herodias had a grudge against [John the Baptist], and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly. (Mark 6:19-20, RSV)

In the end, I do not want to be a Herod, nor do I want you people of this congregation to follow that man’s path. Yet, he is not a totally bad man. Let’s note some of his good points.

FIRST, HE LISTENED TO JOHN THE BAPTIST

First, Herod listened to a hard preacher, John the Baptist. Cognitive Dissonance Theory would predict against Antipas doing what he seems to have done: listened earnestly to the very man he had imprisoned. These are incompatible cognitions, and the theory says that we tend to shy away from such disharmonies. If you imprison a man, you do not usually turn around and listen to him. But Herod listened to John the Baptist, even though John’s preaching must have cut him like a knife.

I picture the two men before each other. Did Herod summon John up to his throne room, under heavy guard, so that the prisoner stood before the king and

¹ The mixed nature of Herod’s virtues and vices is the theme of Charles Spurgeon’s sermon “John and Herod.” Spurgeon does well to urge against being Herods in this world, though I will probably develop his theme in somewhat different ways in this sermon.

preached away at him in front of the nobles and generals and petitioners of all sorts? Or did Herod mosey on down to the dungeon and pull up a stool on the other side of the bars. In either case, Herod enjoyed a sermon tailored made for him. John the Baptist was not a court chaplain. He did not preach to the household and to the nobles. He was a prisoner, who happened had to have a tiny congregation: the king!

I suspect that Herod was not eager for other folks to listen in on these sermons. If there were guards nearby, Herod probably shooed them away a bit, and if they could hear anyway, they had best pretend not to. For John the Baptist was a preacher who pulled no punches, and the King would not enjoy having other people listen in as John blasted away at him.

What had Herod done? Well, he has done deeds that seem not to trouble his wife, Herodias, but certainly trouble John the Baptist. John was like Amos in our First Lesson. The Lord suspends a plumb line. It is a chord with a weight at its end, piercing down toward the center of the earth. It hangs straight and true. Like Amos of old, John the Baptist is not inclined to depart from the plumb line. He does not mean to overlook sin. Herod has immersed himself in sin. Sexual sin seems to be his great weakness. For its sake, he has divorced his wife, and fallen in love with his brother's wife. She, in turn, has divorced her husband and married Antipas. But that is not all. Not only have Antipas and Herodias dishonored their marriage vows, failing to praise and defend holy marriage, but also, Herodias is the niece of Antipas.² Thus incest is added to their chaotic marriages.

Herodias seems not to mind these things. Indeed, I can hardly think of meaner heart that that of Herodias. She abandons her first husband, he takes her uncle as her lover, she permits her daughter to dance her sultry dance before her drunken, lecherous husband, she demands the head of John the Baptist, and she involves her own daughter in the foul deed by sending her child off to the king to ask for the head. Herodias simply seems bad to the bone. Little ambiguity in that woman.

But Herod himself has this great virtue: He is willing to listen to that fiery preacher, John the Baptist, even when John preaches against him, the king. Herod has enough character that he is willing to listen to the one who condemns him.

SECOND, HEROD SEEKS THE WORD OF GOD

The second good trait in Herod is that he listens to John because he seeks the Word of God. He is not intrigued by John as another man might be intrigued by some curiosity, like a white lion or something. No. The king listens to John the Baptist precisely because he recognizes in John a man of righteousness and holiness. Herod "feared" John, our text says, not because John was an evil man, but because he was such a good man. Herod seems to have listened to John because he trusted John to preach the whole counsel of God. John would preach the Word of God fair and square.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_Antipas

They say the powers of preaching of some of the early church fathers, including St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine, were so impressive that the congregation would sometimes erupt in cheers in the midst of the sermon. I have read passages in Chrysostom where he has to interrupt himself and urge the people to calm down and to withhold their applause. And the strange thing is that sometimes the people are applauding the very passages in which Chrysostom is condemning sins of which they themselves are surely guilty. It's just that his eloquence is so moving that they applaud anyway even when they themselves are guilty of the very lust or greed condemned by the preacher.

This can be a mixed thing, but at least part of it may be noble. The bad part is when the sinner applauds the preacher because the preacher has put on a good show, as if the eloquence of the preacher is akin to that of the playwright, and the sinner is applauding a pleasing performance. But the other possibility is good: that the sinner is applauding the preacher precisely because the sinner knows and confesses that his sin, her sin, needs to be rebuked.

This seems to have been the situation of Herod Antipas. John the Baptist rebukes the sin of Herod, and Herod seems to know that he deserves to be rebuked, even *needs* to be rebuked, for his soul hangs in the balance. So he listens.

It seems to me that a soul that longs to be preached *against* for sin is a soul that is halfway to heaven. Such a soul belongs to someone who sins, but is not content in the sinning. For such a one, there is hope.

THIRD: HE IS NOT SWEEPED ALONG BY A BAD COMPANION

The third thing I like in Herod is that he is not swept along by a bad companion. I mean his wife. Herodias has a grudge against John the Baptist because he condemns the sin in which she participates. She wants to hurt John, but her husband protects John from her. The king knows very well what his wife wants, but the king does not yield. At least, he holds out against her for a while.

Many a parent has worried most of all about this: the companions of their children. They fear that the true mother and father of their little ones will not be they themselves, but companions on the playground, or later on the streets or the alleys. They fear the intermingling of the spirit of their child with companions the parents do not trust. Time is wasting, opportunities are being lost, souls are being soiled, consciences are being seared by sin. A good friend is a true blessing on earth, but sometimes companions are unworthy of the trust they are granted.

Herod had a bad companion, but he tried to do the right thing anyway. He tried to protect and to listen to that great man, John the Baptist, and he deserves some credit for that.

HEROD'S FAULTS

Now, for the faults of the king: The faults of Herod Antipas come from his lukewarm nature. His faults follow along after his virtues, but fall exhausted along the way. He sets out on a good path, but does not complete it. He fails not because he lacks virtue, but because his virtues are variable and unreliable.

So, Herod *listens* to John the Baptist, but does not heed him, and in the end, does not protect him. John can be counted upon to preach a good sermon. But Herod cannot be counted upon to profit from that good sermon. Listening to the preacher is good, but heeding the preacher is even better.

And Herod seeks the Word of God. He slips down to the dungeon to listen to John not because he wants entertainment, but because he wants the Word of God. He recognizes that John is a man of justice and holiness. He is drawn to these things. But he is not drawn enough! His interest in holiness of life is not matched by a holy life. He is drawn to the Word of God, but only by half measures. In the end, he is not sufficiently earnest about the Word.

And Herod resists the will of his wife to destroy John, only he does not resist enough. Again, Herod is good by half measures. But that is not good enough.

ALMOST PERSUADED

Back in the 1800s here in America, in a little church here in the east, the pastor, Rev. Mr. Brundage, preached a mighty sermon about King Agrippa -- the Roman King before whom St. Paul gave a moving testimony to Christ. King Agrippa's famous line goes this way:

Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. (Acts 26:28, KJV)

Rev. Brundage ended his sermon with this line:

He who is *almost persuaded* is almost saved, and to be almost saved is to be entirely lost...

In the congregation that day there sat a hymn writer named Philip P. Bliss. He was so impressed by the preacher's thought that he composed a hymn about it called "Almost Persuaded." The final verse goes this way:

"Almost persuaded," [but] harvest is past!
"Almost persuaded," doom comes at last!
"Almost" cannot avail;
"Almost" is but to fail!

Sad, sad, that bitter wail—
“Almost,” but lost!³

The dreadful idea here is that the difference between being “almost persuaded” and being “converted” is the difference between heaven and hell.

The problem for Herod Antipas in this morning’s story is that he is *almost persuaded* by John the Baptist. Herod is halfway right. He seeks the Word of God. But alas, he also clings to his wicked ways, and they win out in the end.

Now, I fear that Rev. Brundage and hymn writer Bliss might have departed from the plumb line a little bit in holding out so little hope for the soul that falls short of being fully persuaded and fully converted. Even for Kings Herod and Agrippa, the one thing we can most confidently say about their eternal destiny is that it lies in the hands of Jesus. We cannot declare them lost. If they are lost, that is up to the Lord, and we ought not to trespass on his authority and judgment.

But there is something we can say about King Herod short of the Last Judgment, during his remaining days on earth: they were not as good as they should have been precisely because he was merely “almost persuaded.” The difference between his “listening” to John versus being “converted” by John was the difference between life and death for John. His lukewarm listening meant beheading for John.

And then, later on down the road, Herod Antipas again has the chance to intervene and save the life of a good man. I mean, Jesus. Herod could have saved Jesus from crucifixion. He had the chance to do so because the Roman governor, Pilate, had sent Jesus to Herod to be judged of him.

But Herod no longer listens earnestly for the Word of God. His spirit has gone downhill. Now, he seeks a spectacle. St. Luke tells the tale this way:

⁸Herod was delighted to see Jesus; he had heard about him and had been wanting for a long time to set eyes on him; moreover, he was hoping to see some miracle worked by him. ⁹So he questioned him at some length, but without getting any reply. ¹⁰Meanwhile the chief priests and the scribes were there, vigorously pressing their accusations. ¹¹Then Herod, together with his guards, treated him with contempt and made fun of him; he put a rich cloak on him and sent him back to Pilate. (Luke 23:8-11, NJB)

This is the inevitable outcome of halfway listening to the Word of God. We coarsen ourselves, and if we are not careful, we are going to mishandle some big cases that come our way.

³ <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/a/l/m/almostpe.htm>

JESUS NEVER DID SUCH A THING

Our Lord Jesus never did such a thing. It is a simple thing to say, but worth a lot to know. The One who is in charge *of all reality* does nothing by half-measures. If saving you takes surrendering his life on the cross, then he does not hold back. There is nothing fainthearted, lukewarm, or unreliable about his love. His righteousness and his holiness and his love are full-measure things. He is the one worth following with our whole hearts, and to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.