

Ephesians 1:3-14  
Mark 6:14-29

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ  
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### Spinning Spider Webs

Mark's Gospel seems to be filled with surprises. For instance, we wonder what the beheading of John the Baptist has to do with anything. We remind ourselves that Mark is listening to Peter reminisce. Mark's Gospel is not a chronology but is a series of Peter's memories connected by words and thoughts. In this particular memory, Peter relates hearing of the beheading of John the Baptist. Peter remembers how Jesus Christ mourned His cousin John's death and seemed sobered by the realization that He, too, will become a victim of evil men with political power. Mark's Gospel links Peter's memories by threads of inspired thoughts.

When we look at John's beheading, we encounter a collision between Good and Evil in which Jesus sees visions of His own death. In this story Herod is a great example of how NOT to act.

The beheading of John alerts his followers that bad things can happen to good and righteous people, and they have every reason to expect it may happen to Jesus. We have reasons to believe that Herod would invite John out of his dungeon to hear John preach and to ask John questions about the anticipated Messiah. At one point, Herod himself spreads a rumor that Jesus is John the Baptist risen from the dead.

Herod's beheading of John the Baptist is just one of his many sinful acts. He is already infamous for murdering his own children because he did not

want them to overthrow him and become more powerful than he. His current wife, Herodias, is his brother Philip's wife whom he takes for himself and breaks the Jewish laws which do not allow a man to marry his brother's wife. Herodias intensely dislikes John because John condemns Herod to his face for marrying her. Herod requests his stepdaughter Salome to dance for him and his drunken dinner guests which then leads to John's murder. All this and more indicates Herod is very sinful!

Sinners may be kings or ordinary people; but the sins of kings, politicians, and/or celebrities are usually more visible if not more notorious. Herod has all the power, wealth, and privilege of a king. Wives and women are his for the asking. Nothing is enough. Herod desires his brother's wife, in direct violation of Mosaic Law. But there are complications. Not only does he violate Jewish Law and break the code of family trust, but he also extends the limits on the ancient taboo against incest!

Sin is defined as "missing the mark" of God's will and law. Herod's sin seems more serious. Recklessly exercising his power and privilege, he takes dead aim on every standard of decency and morality. For his murders of his own children, killing other people, and flaunting God, Herod deserves a place in a museum of history's villains! These villains have in common the self-importance which leads them to commit the most terrible crimes.

Biblical history contains many examples of warnings about leaders who sin because they take advantage of their God-given power to challenge God Himself. David defies his kingly trust when he has Uriah killed so he can satisfy his desires for Bathsheba. In contrast, the secret of Samuel's

greatness may have been his mother, Hannah's, prayer of dedication for him when he was born. Her prayer is, "Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge and by Him actions are weighed." (1 Sam. 2:3) This is a prayer of dedication for all who have the potential to rise to leadership and power, and to be good role models for others. The capacity to be a great saint or a great sinner increases accordingly. Like Samuel, a person may be honored for humility before God; or, like Herod, condemned because of the sin of self-importance.

No matter how self-important a sinner may be, God is faithful to get the sinner's attention and stop the person in his or her sin. Herod is no exception. John is not flattered to be invited for personal audiences with Herod. On one visit soon after Herod steals Herodias, John steps into the first-century equivalent of the Oval Office, points a finger at the red-faced, purple-robed Herod, and denounces him for the sin of taking his brother's wife. Despite Herodias's urging to kill John, Herod throws him into the dungeon. Mark seems to give Herod credit for recognizing John as a just and holy man by bringing him out to hear his message. It is possible Herod still has a shred of conscience not yet destroyed by sin. These are the traces, even in the most evil of people, with which God chooses to work. How good God is! Herod may still have hope.

Rationalization is part of sinning, especially when bits of character and conscience still remain. When Herod steals his brother's wife, he may have told himself it did not matter, that he was above the Law. Lesser sinners have other excuses, such as "Why not? Everybody's doing it," or "I owe it

to myself.” Whatever the invented reason, the sinner is selfish in forgetting there are others involved who may be hurt. Sin is like a spider spinning a web. Beginning with a single filament, thread after thread is spun and interconnected until the filmy structure forms a world of its own. Sin, like a spider’s web, has personal and political alignments which trap us and the people with whom we are associated. Sir Walter Scott wrote, “Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!”

Herod’s web of sin includes entanglements with Herodias, his current wife, and Salome, his stepdaughter. Herodias shares her husband’s sin, but does not have his uncertainty about the existence of the prophet. She will not rest until John is dead. Herod’s and Herodias’s web spins out to ensnare Salome who does not understand the stakes for which she dances. Once her alcohol-crazed stepfather promises her anything, and her hate-crazed mother sees her chance, Salome becomes an accomplice to the crime of murdering John the Baptist.

If only we would stop long enough to consider the others who are drawn into our sins. Guilt, like sin, is contagious. It has the capacity for infecting people physically and psychologically. When the news of Jesus’ fame as a preacher of repentance and a miracle-worker reaches Herod, his guilt causes him to think John the Baptist is risen from the dead! The guilt of his sin overcomes him. John the Baptist loses his head, but Herod loses his soul.

In Herod, Jesus confronts evil at its worst, possessing a man with the potential for greatness, convincing him he is above the law, entangling him in alliances from which he cannot escape, causing him to sin beyond his

conscience, and leaving him to suffer from the haunting of guilt. Jesus knows He will face these same evil forces in their effort to destroy Him. We could face them as well.

We know the ending to this story. Christ is crucified, overcomes death, is Resurrected, and lives forever. As a prophet and believer, John the Baptist also lives forever. We, too, have the opportunity to live in eternity with Christ. We recognize we are sinners. We confess our sins and are forgiven them. Hopefully, we accept God's love, grace, and forgiveness and try to sin no more. Christ knows we are not perfect because we are human. Sometimes we are caught in spider webs from which we eventually escape. We escape from these sinful spider webs and avoid them by loving, obeying, and serving Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. May we continue to strengthen the web which brings us into a closer relationship with Christ and with each other as we use our God-given opportunities to spin webs of love instead of webs of sin. Amen.