

## Dancing in the Kingdom of God

Our readings from 2 Samuel and Mark's Gospel show us kingship at its best and absolute worst. David has defeated Israel's enemies and united his people. Now, he brings the Ark of the Covenant, Israel's most sacred religious symbol, to his capital city of Jerusalem. David dons a linen ephod, the garment worn by Adonai's priests, and dances exuberantly before the Ark. This is David's finest moment, better even than when he stepped forth armed with only a slingshot and his faith to defeat the monstrous Goliath and save his people. In this moment, dancing before the Ark, David is truly Adonai's darling, the divinely anointed king of God's chosen people.

Herod Antipas was never God's darling. Son of the Herod who tried to kill Jesus in his cradle, this Herod isn't a king at all. He's a tetrarch, appointed by the Roman Emperor to rule over about a quarter of his father's former kingdom. Herod Antipas is a weak man, touchy about his image and authority, enslaved by his physical appetites, and haunted by his sins. When he starts hearing rumors about Jesus, Herod immediately concludes that John the Baptist, whom he beheaded, has returned from the dead. Then, Mark tells us how that beheading came about.

It's a bit surprising that Mark tells us this story at all. Jesus doesn't even appear in it, which is unusual. It's not in chronological order –it's clearly a flashback. And it's not a typical Markan text. Mark usually skips straight to the action; for backstory, read Luke or Matthew. We know Herod beheaded John because first century historian Flavius Josephus confirms it. Only Mark's Gospel fully explains why Herod beheaded the Baptist, however. Matthew gives us a brief synopsis, Luke only mentions Herod's reaction to the rumors about Jesus, and John's Gospel skips the whole episode. So, what is Mark telling us with this sad, sordid little tale?

King or mere tetrarch, Herod has allowed his court to become a cesspool. He has abandoned his lawful wife to marry Herodias, wife of his half-brother, Philip. Herodias happens

to be Herod's niece, which makes Herod's indiscretion even worse. When John calls out the unlawful marriage, Herodias wants to kill the Baptist, but Herod protects him. He's both frightened and fascinated by John, whom he recognizes as a holy man. But when Herod finds himself boxed in by a rash promise, perhaps made under the influence of too much wine after his stepdaughter Salome's dancing entertained him at his birthday party, his pride overwhelms whatever decency he has left. He literally gives the girl John the Baptist's head on a plate.

This is a repulsive story, especially if we consider some of its implications. 17<sup>th</sup> century theologian Matthew Henry thought Herod set the whole thing up himself to dispose of a troublesome critic without upsetting his followers too much. As Henry points out, had Salome asked for even a quarter of Herod's kingdom, the wily politician whom Jesus dismissed as "that fox" would undoubtedly have found a way to refuse. Even if Herod didn't know what was coming, though, he knew he was about to kill God's anointed prophet. He knew, and he did it anyway. Herod Antipas was selfish, cruel, rapacious, vain, paranoid, and willing to do whatever it took to stay in power. He was exactly what Samuel warned the people a king would be when they first asked for a human monarch to replace Adonai. Sadly, David wasn't all that much better.

When he dances before the Ark of the Covenant, David is no longer the sweet-faced shepherd boy that Adonai loved. Battle has hardened him, and power has started to corrupt him. He's become vain enough to rename Jerusalem for himself. The reckless boy who once charged a giant is now self-protective, afraid to move the Ark of the Covenant – which, admittedly, is known to electrocute anyone who touches it improperly – without taking extraordinary precautions. Moving the Ark isn't just a tribute to Adonai. It's a political message that David is God's chosen, reinforced when he usurps and dons the ephod of a priest. David has also become a man who uses women for personal pleasure and political power. Michal, the woman who

despises David, isn't just Saul's daughter. She's David's first wife who once loved him. But David has taken other wives to cement his political alliances. He apparently hasn't made Michal his queen, because she's watching alone from her window, not dancing beside him. If Michal despises David, perhaps it's because he has broken her heart.

We shouldn't demonize Michal, Herodias, or Salome. They were captives in the gilded cage of a cruel patriarchy that valued women only as pawns to be moved on a political chessboard and breeding stock for future kings. Noble women were raised to see themselves that way. Salome's dance, however seductive, reflects the depravity of Herod's court more than the state of her soul. She didn't even know what to ask Herod to give her. Whatever Salome's faults or her mother's, Herod was the one who executed John. He knew it, and it haunted him.

David's worst mistakes are still to come, though he will never stoop to Herod's level, thank God. Here, at the pinnacle of his success, David can still dance with mostly innocent delight in his beloved God. The more David becomes a king rather than a shepherd, however, the less he retains his innocence. If English historian Lord Acton was correct in telling Bishop Creighton that "power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely," David becomes proof that even those who come to power with God's blessing become corrupted if they cling to that power too tightly. David was as good as kings get, and he was still deeply flawed.

So, what does all of this have to do with Jesus, and with us? Although this story prefigures the fate that Jesus will suffer at the hands of a decadent weakling who apparently learned nothing from beheading the Baptist, the larger message comes from where Mark places it in his Gospel narrative. Immediately before this passage, Jesus sends the disciples out in pairs, empowering them to cure the sick and cast out demons. Immediately after, Jesus takes the disciples to a deserted place and is soon surrounded by people whom he pities as sheep without a

shepherd. Herod, who should be their shepherd, has become too corrupt to care for his people. So, Jesus takes up the shepherd's mantle, teaching and feeding the people even when the crowd swells to a full five thousand. Unlike Herod and, to a lesser extent, David, Jesus disdains prestige and isn't tempted by the trappings of power. Through Jesus, we learn what responsible use of power looks like and what the Kingdom of God is really all about.

No one could ever have more power than Jesus; we're blessed that he uses his power to care for his flock. The Kingdom of God, Jesus's kingdom, is a place of safety and healing, where fear is banished and there's plenty for everyone. The Kingdom probably isn't a place where anyone can lord it over others, because the Kingdom has only one Lord and nobody, not even those who were the most powerful in this world, can measure up to him. But the Kingdom *is* a place filled with joy and wonder, a place where C.S. Lewis thought people couldn't help but sing and dance. Maybe that makes you nervous. If so, you're not alone. Very few of us can get up and dance, especially in front of others, without feeling self-conscious. There's always the fear that someone will judge us, as Michal did when she lashed out at David from her broken heart. Perhaps we should try not to cling too hard to our dignity, though. Perhaps there's nothing wrong with being a little clumsy or looking a little silly now and then. Maybe Jesus finds our occasional awkwardness endearing. Maybe he loves us exactly as we are.

Too many people are clinging too hard to power these days. It's not an easy time to take ourselves or anyone else lightly. The stakes feel terribly high. The Kingdom of God is coming, though, and the true King is on his way. When he arrives, and he will, there will be places for all of us in his kingdom, and we'll be relieved of the terrible responsibilities and temptations that come with power we were never meant to wield. My prayer is that each of you will find a joyous place in Christ's Kingdom. When you do, I hope you dance. *Amen.*