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

In this morning’s sermon, let us consider two kings: King David of old and King Herod in this morning’s Gospel story. The two kings are separated in time by a thousand years, but they are united in strong desires and their willingness to abuse their office for the sake of their desires. These are sad stories when we think of the injustice of it all. Especially these are sad stories when we think of how some of you might have been hurt by people above you who treated you badly. There is a God who can heal the brokenhearted and set things right. Jesus can do this. He can be your fortress and refuge and he will give you peace if you will come unto him. You will live to see his salvation. Meanwhile let us flee the sins of King David and of King Herod.

My opening text for this sermon speaks of King Herod. It refers to a terrible delay in the man. Herod hears the word of God, but he delays until it is too late. Our text, then, goes this way:

...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 6:20, RSV)

Herod gladly heard John the Baptist, but did nothing about it, until events and his own weakness miserably swept him along toward the beheading of the Baptist. And so it is that a man, a woman, is playing with fire when he hears the word of God but delays.

Let us begin our examination of these two kings by speaking of King David of old. The sin of which I speak, and the sin that makes David akin to Herod, is unbridled lust. God’s holy law is against adultery and murder, but both King David and King Herod let their lust ride on all the way into terrible wickedness.

When we recall the story of King David and Bathsheba, the eye tends to linger on David and to overlook Bathsheba. David is the great King of Israel. In many ways he is a hero and a saint of Israel. Our eye tends to focus on him and to slide right on by the woman he wronged. But that is not how our God sees the matter. The Bible says that our God regards the lowly. Here is how Psalm 138 puts the point:
Though the LORD be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly: but the proud he knoweth afar off. (Psalm 138:6, KJV)

And so, in the showdown between King David and lowly Bathsheba, we could well believe that the eye and the heart of the Lord are with the woman. The Lord grieves for her sense of helplessness before the king. The king summons her and she must go to his bed. The Lord sorrows along with Bathsheba at the wicked death of her husband—a death commanded by King David.

What has become of David? He started off in life so well! You young people in the congregation: Do not think to yourself that you will put off piety and purity and courage for later in life, when you are grown up. Why, David was but a lad when he fought mighty Goliath. He was too young, he was too slight to even wear the armor offered him by King Saul. He strode forth toward that mighty giant without the armor of sword and shield, but with the armor of faith in our God. And that was enough!

But now look at him in middle age. David has become Goliath. David has become the very kind of man that he overcame when he was a boy. Now David has all the strength and all the advantages. Now Bathsheba and her husband are like children compared to him. What can they realistically do, but obey the king? And so they obey, even if their obedience means sorrow and death for them.

Glad to say, the arc of David’s life has an upswing. David starts off great as a young man. Then he plunges into terrible sin—both the sins of adultery and murder. But then he recovers. He sorrows for his sin and he repents of it. To this very day, we cherish his words of longing for forgiveness. We find them in Psalm 51:

1Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

2Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!

3For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

9Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

10Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. (Psalm 51: 1-3, 9-10, RSV)
Ah! To have a clean heart again! David longs and prays for such 
forgiveness, and he receives it. The Lord forgives David, though such 
forgiveness is not easy for David, and you get the picture of the man that he 
lives out his years with his own sorrows. Still, we honor King David because 
he repented of his sins and sought a clean heart again.

King Herod does no such thing. We find him as a man who has committed 
adultery with his brother’s wife, who has imprisoned John the Baptist for 
preaching out against the adultery, who has eagerly listened to John the 
Baptist down there in the prison cell, but who has done nothing about it, until 
at last he orders the death of the holy man. There is no upswing for King 
Herod. In fact we will find him again during Holy Week. There too he will be a 
weak and unjust man. When he has the chance to save Jesus, he simply punts 
the ball on down the field and hands the matter over to Pilate. We read about 
this in St. Luke Chapter 23. We read of how roughly Herod treats Jesus. The 
words go this way:

And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt 
and mocked him; then, arraying him in gorgeous apparel, 
he sent him back to Pilate. (Luke 23:11, RSV)

Herod, what are we to do with you? Where did things go wrong for you? 
Where did you go wrong?

Let’s return to the jail cell down in the dungeon of Herod’s palace. John the 
Baptist stands on one side of the bars preaching away about righteousness 
and holiness. Herod has drawn himself up a chair—probably a comfortable 
one—and he listens to John the Baptist. He listens, but he is not changed by 
his listening. He does not permit himself to restructure his life in a more holy 
direction. He is the King. With the snap of his fingers, he could command the 
release of John the Baptist. It is hard to see how he can set right the damage 
he has done to his brother, by marrying his brother’s wife. But at least he can 
say to the Baptist... at least he can whisper through the jail bars to John that 
he, the king, knows that he did wrong in his affair with Herodias. And he could 
have firmly resolved to protect John the Baptist from Herodias, for she bears 
him a grudge. But Herod makes no such firm resolution. He does not 
determine to protect John, and in the end, he orders the death of a man that 
himself recognizes to be a righteous and holy man. How does Herod sleep 
at night?

Some of us have been blessed to hear the word of God for many a year 
now. In some of us, the Holy Spirit has moved in our hearts, bidding us 
onward toward a more Christ-like life. For some of us, we have heard the 
story of Jesus and we have thought to ourselves, “I want to be more like him. 
In this modern world, in the midst of my various responsibilities and 
opportunities, I want to be more like Jesus.” But have we delayed? From King
Herod, let us learn that it is not good to delay when the Holy Spirit is moving in our hearts. “Choose you this day whom you will serve” says the Lord (Joshua 24:15). Choose this day. Do not put it off for tomorrow or for ten years down the road. “Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). As the old saying goes, do not put off till tomorrow what you can do today. King Herod put off his work of repentance until tomorrow, and in the end he seems never to have turned to that good work.

There is a second way in which King Herod seems to have gone wrong. This concerns his audience. Given that he had made his ridiculous promise to the daughter of Herodias, he could have backed out of that promise, but he did not because he worried about his audience. The girl asked for the head of the Baptist on a platter. The girl had consulted with her mother who made this demand. King Herod had recklessly promised to give the dancing girl whatever she asked but he should not have agreed to this unjust request. But he did agree to it because he worried too much about his guests. Or rather, he cared too little for the one Guest he should have cared most about in this world. That is, he cared too little about his Maker.

Do you remember that I said earlier in this sermon that the Lord keeps his eye on the lowly? Well, that means that the Lord has his eye on John the Baptist down there in the dungeon. The Lord had his eye on the man as the guard swung his ax and cut off the head of the Baptist. The Lord knows all about this, and means to require an account. King Herod should have been worrying about this more than he worried about the opinion of his guests.

As for you and me, it is natural that we should care about the opinion of people around us. It is natural for students to care about the opinion of their classmates, for scholars to care about the opinion of their colleagues, for workers of all sorts to care about the opinion of their coworkers, and for partygoers to care about the opinion of others at the party or whatever the gathering is. But alongside caring about all these opinions, let us also care about the thoughts of the angels and the archangels, of our ancestors in the whole communion of saints, and above all, for the opinion of Jesus, who has done so very much for us, who loves us with all his heart, who is very wise concerning what is best for us, and to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen