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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, January 31, 2024  
Matthew 14:1-12  
The Wickedness of Herod

HOLY GOSPEL ..... Matthew 14:1-12, RSV  
*Last week we read that Jesus did not do many mighty deeds in his hometown, Nazareth, because of the unbelief of the people. Now we read of the death of John the Baptist.*

<sup>14</sup>At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus; <sup>2</sup>and he said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist, he has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him.” <sup>3</sup>For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison, for the sake of Hero’ di-as, his brother Philip’s wife; <sup>4</sup>because John said to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” <sup>5</sup>And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. <sup>6</sup>But when Herod’s birthday came, the daughter of Hero’ di-as danced before the company, and pleased Herod, <sup>7</sup>so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. <sup>8</sup>Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.” <sup>9</sup>And the king was sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given; <sup>10</sup>he sent and had John beheaded in the prison, <sup>11</sup>and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. <sup>12</sup>And his disciples came and took the body and buried it; and they went and told Jesus.

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

The scene set before us is not a promising one. It was the custom back then that men and women were separated from one another at a banquet.<sup>1</sup> That meant that not even Herodias could see her daughter dance. The girl was off there with the men, and she danced in such a way as to please her stepfather, Herod Antipas. Indeed, she pleased him so much that he made a foolish promise to her. He must have been drunk! He promised to give her “whatever she might ask.”

And so it is that we come to the human moment I want to discuss. It is a moment I hope that does not come to us, but if it does, I want us to do better than King Herod did. I speak of that moment when we are so far under the power of passion that we make a foolish commitment. That is what Herod did.

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<sup>1</sup>Craig Keener mentions this division of men and women in his *Lectionary Commentary* on Mark 6:14-29.

He made a foolish commitment. Indeed, he made a wicked commitment, and so following through on it would have been a terrible thing.

But that fool Herod did follow through on his wicked promise. Why? It seems that he did not want to look bad before his guests. Our text puts it this way:

<sup>9</sup>And the king was sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given; (Matthew 14:9, RSV)

He commanded *it* to be given. That is, he commanded that the head of John the Baptist should be given on a platter to the girl.

But this is ridiculous! Does the man think that he will look better in the eyes of his guests for them to witness murder? There is no indication that the room is cleared. The guests are there when he commands the fulfilling of his promise to the girl. It is reasonable to think that they are still there when the bloody head is brought back to him. Thereby Herod imagines that he makes himself look good before his guests, but this is insane. His guests should be appalled at him.

Oh! The terrible things we are tempted to do in order to look good in the eyes of others. Especially I am thinking of the young. It takes a strong character to withstand peer pressure — even over obviously stupid things like illegal drugs. And so I commend Jesus to the young. Let your love of Jesus be stronger in your life than any form of peer pressure and any form of passion!

On the other hand, the desire to look good in the eyes of others can be a good thing. It all depends on the audience whose approval we seek. If you have good parents, for example, it is wise to try to look good in their eyes. Best of all, it is excellent to try to look good in the eyes of heaven and of heaven's Lord, Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Those are the eyes whose approval we should seek. Those are the faces whose smiles we should desire.

The problem with Herod was that he was not taking into account the divine dimension of things. And would you believe it? The failure to think of God makes us dangerous people here on earth. Herod was not thinking of God when he commanded the head of John the Baptist. But there is no escaping God. And if we have not entirely hardened our hearts, there is no escaping the conscience that God has given to us. And so it is that when Herod hears about the fame of Jesus, immediately he thinks of John. His conscience troubles him. He might have killed John, but he has not killed John's Maker nor his own Maker. Herod is going to have to account for himself someday before God. None of his power, none of his wealth, none of his soldiers can protect him from this. He is going to answer to God for what he has done.

So are we! That is why I say that I hope you and I will do better than Herod when we are tempted to do something foolish for the sake of looking good before others.

Herod blamed his wickedness on his oath. Well, it was a foolish oath well deserving of being repudiated. When the girl asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter, he should simply have answered, "You idiot! Go away. I offer you the world, and you ask for the head of a good man. I certainly will not grant such an evil request." But he did not answer in that sensible way.

Not all oaths, then, are worthy of being honored. But you and I have made an oath that is indeed worthy of being honored. All of the baptized have done the same. We have solemnly renounced the devil and all his false promises and all his false ways. And we have solemnly committed ourselves to Jesus Christ, for time and for eternity. This is the great oath in our lives. This is the oath that cannot be superseded by any other promise. It *ought not* to be superseded by any other promise. To subordinate this promise to any other promise is to drag ourselves downward.

The solemn promises of baptism, then, give a wholesome stability to our lives. They keep us on the straight and narrow. They keep us on the good path precisely because they beckon us to draw ever closer to Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.