

Sermon – Mark 6:14-29
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“Who is Jesus?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Who is Jesus? No doubt many of you share similar answers to this simple yet crucial question, answers shaped by years of faith: Savior, Lord, teacher, friend. God. And no doubt some of you are of a more skeptical bent, sure that Jesus was a wise man and a good person, but unsure of more than that. And maybe a few of you here today have wandered in this morning, desperate to believe in the rumors that this Jesus, this One of whom you have heard, is the One who can help you. And I pray peace and blessing upon you as you encounter Jesus this morning. Yes, there are many answers to this simple question. But I am willing to bet that no one here is thinking, “Oh, yeah, Jesus? I bet he’s that guy whose head I had chopped off a while back.” At least, I hope no one is thinking that. If you are, please see me after worship. I’d like to schedule a pastoral conversation with you as we have a number of matters to discuss!
2. Who is Jesus? In our reading today, this is the central question for Herod. For he has begun to hear of Jesus, this teacher who has sent forth his disciples with nothing but sandals, walking sticks, and the power of God. Herod has heard of how these disciples are casting out demons and curing the sick wherever they go. After recounting the sending of the Twelve, Mark cuts to Herod’s palace and shows us this king, brooding in worry that his past is about to come back to quite literally haunt him. So, a flashback. John the Baptist had the temerity to point out to Herod that he shouldn’t have married

Herodias, the one-time wife of his brother, Philip. Still, Herod was intrigued by John, but Herodias had it out for him. A party happens and she seizes her moment. She sends their daughter out to dance; Herod is euphemistically “pleased” and promises to give the girl whatever she’d like, even half his kingdom. At mom’s instruction, she asks Herod for the Baptist’s head on a platter. And Herod, unable to back down due to his pride, has John executed. In a few verses, Mark manages to tell a story that includes just about every possible variation of human sin. In this gross, lewd, violent episode, we can see what Herod is worried about, and we can see what Jesus is up against – but also what he is up *to* as his mission spreads and grows.

3. Who is Jesus? Well, Herod is wrong, but he’s on the right track. For Jesus is not zombie-John the Baptist, come to hunt and haunt him for his sin. But John was the beachhead of God’s incursion into the world of power, greed, and sin that Herod represents, and Jesus is following hot on his cousin’s heels to upend the Herods of this world and all of their petty kingdoms. By placing this episode right after the sending of the Twelve, Mark wants us to see these two types of kingdoms in comparison and contradiction: One marked with glitz and greed and fueled by death, the other shown and known by powerlessness and paucity but driven by life. Jesus is not John back from the dead to haunt Herod. Jesus is the One to whom John pointed, who is headed toward death on a cross, a death that will put Herod and his ilk to rout; that will make sin and death powerless.
4. Who is Jesus? He is the Lord of the new kingdom, the new reign of God that continues to coexist with the kingdoms of this world. All that bound Herod still binds this world. Power and pride, lavishness and lust, sin and death. We still live in a world in which another Black man was shot last night by police in our city, details of which continue to emerge. We still live in a world in which governments are willing to separate children from parents. We still live in a world in which nations seek to undermine other nations. You need

not even have a partisan viewpoint to know that such events grieve the heart of God, to see in these and many other things signs of the world's brokenness, of its kingdoms' failures. But Jesus' message is that this world is coming to an end, and a new one is emerging in its midst. And it will not come because of a change in worldly power. It will come because of who Jesus is: a new kind of ruler who leads not with power but with love, who demands no one's death, who gives himself away for the sake of the world in a new kind of kingdom, in which we won't have to solve violence or racism or immigration on our own because God in Christ will be all in all and we will be free of all that now binds us. In the meantime we do have work to do; our task is to be peacemaking, love-loosing, life-giving leaven in the midst of this world – working to make this world more like the world to come, day by day, little by little, with the sure and certain hope that God will do what God has promised.

5. Who is Jesus? He's the One who helps us live out this gospel. I've seen it happen. I saw Jesus all over the place last week with our 27-person mission team in Martin, Slovakia. With almost two hundred children, we danced and sang and crafted and learned about Jesus, the One who rescues; the One who saves. And we did so in a town where communism sought, for two generations, to decapitate Christendom. For decades, people were asked, "Who is Jesus?" And for decades, an answer that betrayed faith in Christ as Lord was enough to earn a career as a ditch digger, or worse. But Jesus has this knack for working life out of death, and the flame of faith was kept burning until freedom came. Where they tried to kill Christianity, people of faith now proclaim him as Lord, giving hope back to a once-hopeless community. We, of course, played only a small part in that, but God will use our work, too. If nothing else, there are now a couple hundred people in Martin who keep humming the VBS song, "My Lighthouse," in spite of themselves. But prior to VBS, a few of us were blessed to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Center for Christian Education, during which they celebrated the first graduating class of the Lutheran Academy. And now, from

a building that was once a publishing house printing atheist screeds and, later, pornography, now emerge more than 30 young people, sent off like Jesus sent the Twelve, bearing the light of Christ. And off they go, to universities in Slovakia and the Czech Republic and England, and even just down the road to Purdue University. And they go as Christ-followers, leaven in the midst of this world. Who is Jesus? He is the One who makes such a thing possible.

6. Who is Jesus? He is the not-Herod, the ruler of a new world that upends the old. And he is the One who calls and sends you. For you, friends, live in both worlds, and Jesus in his grace calls you to live for the sake of the new one. So what does this mean? Three things: First, if you ever marry your brother's ex-wife, and then your daughter dances for you and asks you to chop off someone's head, don't do it. Seriously. I think the Bible is clear on this. Second, and more broadly, you never know when you will stand at an important intersection between the earthly kingdom and the heavenly, but be prepared to act as a citizen of God's reign. If you tempted to power for its own sake, reject it. If you are witness to power's abuse, stand with the oppressed. And third, go with the gospel in your heart. For you were chosen by God, destined for salvation, named and claimed in the waters of baptism just like little Giovanna will be today. I don't know what will happen to her in the years to come, and I can't say what she will happen to do. But I know that she is a child of God, and I know that you are, too. May we, sisters and brothers, live by grace under the loving rule of Jesus, and, by grace, let that love rule our work in this world. Who is Jesus? The One who was dead and yet now lives; the One through whom God's good work is possible. That's who. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.