

# A WINTER BIBLE STUDY ON THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Tuesday March 30, 2021: Session 6 - Readings

Galilee: "The Mission of the Twelve" Mark 6:1-29

## The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

## The Mission of the Twelve

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

## The Death of John the Baptist

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It

### 1. Peek at the Greek: *skandalizo* (σκανδαλίζω)

In Mark 6:3, we find a word that gives us insight into a crucial aspect of what happens when we share the message of Jesus with others. Mark writes that when the Jewish community in Nazareth heard Jesus teaching, they "took offense." The Greek word is *skandalizo*, from which we get the English term "scandal."

Throughout the New Testament, *skandalizo* often shows up to describe Jewish reactions to Jesus. Sometimes it takes the form of a noun and gets translated "stumbling block" (See Rom 9:33; 1 Cor. 1:23; Gal 5:11; 1 Pet. 2:8). Like Francis pointed out in the video session, the problem with the people of Nazareth was their unbelief in the face of Jesus's teachings.

In a day and age where we're very hesitant to offend anyone, the true gospel is provocative—it always has been. That doesn't mean we should be divisive or impolite when we tell people about Jesus. But we should expect the message itself to come across like a scandal.

**Reflect on occasions when you have talked about Jesus and faced resistance. What sort of setting were you in—with folks you knew, with strangers, in person or online, etc.? What objections did your listeners bring up?**

**Why are we to persist in sharing the gospel despite opposition? What's the point?**

**In what ways is your faith strengthened through uncomfortable faith conversations?**

### 2. Peek at the Greek: *metanoeo* (μετανοέω)

One of the biggest reasons (if not the biggest reason) that the message of Jesus is off-putting to some is the issue of repentance. In 6:12, Mark says the disciples proclaimed that people should repent.

The word translated "repent" is *metanoeo*, which literally means to change one's mind. In the Old Testament Hebrew, the word is

## **2. Peek at the Greek: *metanoeo*** (Continued)

shub, which means to physically turn around or turn back. If we take both together, repentance involves both our mind and our behavior. It involves turning our backs on all that is ungodly and turning to face what is pleasing to God— both literally in how we behave but also in how we think.

Mark makes repentance the hallmark requirement for salvation. No one can be saved without acknowledging their sin and clinging to Jesus.

What do we do with this information? The reason the gospel is so provocative is precisely because it demands change. Think about it—people might turn to God when it would mean a change from bad circumstances. But if life's good, why change at all?

Even for us who already accept the message, change is hard. Repentance is still hard.

**Think about your own relationship with Jesus. How has it changed your mind about various beliefs? Certain behaviors?**

**In what ways has your faith in Christ changed your goals and hopes for the future?**

is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.” And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers

and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.” She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.” Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.”

## **3. Background: Which Herod is which?**

King Herod plays a part in several New Testament narratives. But we must be careful to know which Herod the authors are referring to.

**Herod the Great:** Herod the Great ruled Judea during the time of Jesus's birth. His reign lasted from 37 BC to 4 BC; he was the king whom the magi met, and who had the boys of Bethlehem murdered in his search for the baby Jesus. **Imagine having that sort of father. How might his sons have related to Herod the Great?**

Herod the Great had numerous wives and children. After his death, his kingdom was divided among three of his sons, the northern portion of Galilee going to his son Herod Antipas. Antipas is the Herod we meet in Mark 6.

**Antipas:** Years before, Antipas had fallen for Herodias, who was both his niece (the daughter of his late half-brother Aristobulus,) and his sister-in-law—wife of another half-brother, identified in Mark 6 as Philip. Herodias thus had married her half-uncle and, with Antipas, married another one. The Herodian family was complex, to say the least. When John the Baptist began his ministry, Antipas and Herodias lived together openly as husband and wife. As Mark

### **3. Background: Which Herod is which?** (Continued)

6 flashes back, we discover that John had rebuked Antipas for marrying her, as such a marriage went against the Law of Moses. In retaliation, Antipas imprisoned him but occasionally brought him out to hear his teaching. “Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly” (6:20).

Herodias felt no such respect. She “had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death” (6:19). When her daughter danced before Herod at his birthday banquet (6:21–25), Antipas was so pleased that he offered to give her anything she desired. Her request— at her mother’s prompting—was John’s head on a platter. Antipas reluctantly granted her request (Mark 6:27–28; Matt 14:9–11). In this story we find a lesson about pride and humility: the high-ranking Herodias was unwilling to accept censure from a wilderness preacher. **How well do you accept rebuke for sinful behavior?**

We also see the results of unwise, spontaneous promises: Antipas did not consider the potential consequences of his promise to give her “anything.” **Have you ever spoken before you thought it through completely? Were you able to make things right?**

#### **Crucifixion of Jesus**

Later, Jesus appeared before Antipas as part of the trumped-up trial before his crucifixion (Luke 23:6–12). When Pilate questioned him, he learned that Jesus was Galilean and sent him to Antipas (Luke 23:2–5). Initially, Antipas was glad to see Jesus and hoped that he might perform a miracle (Luke 23:8; 9:9). But having questioned him with no response, Antipas sent him back to Pilate, concluding that he was innocent (Luke 23:10–11; 23:12, 15).

#### **A third Herod: Agrippa**

Whereas Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus (son of Herod the Great), Herod Agrippa was her brother. He deposed Antipas, his uncle, in 39 AD, to become ruler of a large portion of Judea, Galilee, and surrounding territories. He persecuted Christians, ordering the execution of the apostle James (Acts 12:1–3), and the

### **3. Background: Which Herod is which?** (Continued)

imprisonment of the apostle Peter (Acts 12:3–19), after which Agrippa died directly as a judgment of God.

The contrast between the Herodian family and that of Jesus and John is stark. One dysfunctional family hungry for glory, the other—cousins—hungry for the glory of God. Every royal political machination was motivated by a self-centered pursuit of self-aggrandizement. John the Baptist and Jesus preached the Word of God, repentance, and holiness. We may not be royals, but often we often seek fame and glory. **Have accolades and praise filled you up emotionally? Made you think better of yourself? Or have they exposed an emptiness in your life? How?**

**How can the contrast between the Herods and John and Jesus help you reflect on your own motivations? How can you move from seeking your own glory to seeking God’s instead?**

## **BACKGROUND ON THE GOSPEL OF MARK**

**Jesus Rejected, Sends the 12, John Beheaded:**

**Turning the Tables: Commentary on Mark 6:1-29**

By: Micah D. Kiel: Working Preacher.

**Turning the Tables:** The stories leading up to the beginning of chapter 6 have generally been taking place in Galilee, but in 6:1 Jesus specifically goes home. Things do not go well. His teaching in the Synagogue produces amazement, but also questions as to the origin of Jesus’ insight. This is not the first time that an encounter with Jesus results in the question: “*Who is this?*” There has been a nice reversal, however, from Jesus’ first encounter at home in 3:19b-35. In his first episode while at home, no one questions Jesus’ identity, only his sanity. Jesus, however, reconstitutes his family: “*Who are my mother and my brothers? Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother*” (3:33-35 NRSV). Almost as if to mock Jesus for his question in ch. 3, in ch. 6 Jesus’ family

questions his identity: “*Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon?*” (6:3 NRSV).

Mark turns the tables in another way as well. Previously, characters with faith sought out an encounter with Jesus, which resulted in a healing and widespread amazement. Here, at Jesus’ home, things happen in reverse. The encounter with Jesus produces few miracles because of a lack of faith. More pointedly, it is Jesus, not the crowds, who marvels (a reversal also noted by Clifton Black, who says “now Jesus is the one flabbergasted”<sup>1</sup>). The stories in chapter 5 suggested that both societal and religious institutions do not control how the Kingdom of God works. In Mark 6:1-6, this dynamic extends even to the family. They question where Jesus is getting his wisdom and power, and their reaction is “offense” (NRSV). Perhaps a better way to translate this would be to say that they were “scandalized by him.” He presented a stumbling block.

**Finally, Some Success:** If the pericope at the beginning of chapter 6 confirms Mark’s pessimism regarding human volition, 6:7-13 reverses things. Other than their initial decision to follow Jesus in chapter 1, this may be the zenith for the disciples’ success in the entire gospel. Jesus sends them out two by two, and they have some success: casting out many demons and curing some who were sick. This good feeling will not last long. The story about John the Baptists’ death intervenes, but by the end of chapter 6, the disciples will be further ensconced in their lack of belief and hardened hearts.

**A Morbid Interlude:** This brings us to the story about the death of John the Baptist, which is anomalous for several reasons. First, it is one of the longest episodes in the gospel where Jesus is not present on stage. The other instances of Jesus’ absence are easily explained: plots to kill Jesus and the post-resurrection account of the empty tomb. From a narratological point of view, it also stands out because it is a flashback. The reader has heard nothing of John the Baptist since ch. 1, when Mark reports that Jesus’ ministry begins after John was arrested. One wonders, then, with Jesus off-stage, and John already dead anyway, why Mark lingers on this story at this point in the narrative?

**Suspense:** Clifton Black uses Alfred Hitchcock to help explain the tension in the intercalated stories in 5:21-43.<sup>2</sup> Here, a different movie may be instructive in understanding the narrative technique Mark is using. The story about John’s death interrupts the flow of the narrative, and at an important point. For two chapters, Mark pummeled his reader with the idea that human initiative is moot; the Kingdom of God does its own thing independent of, or, more pointedly, in spite of, humanity. The story in Mark 6:7-13 disrupts this tendency, as the disciples have some success. The reader might very well then be forced with a question: are the disciples complete failures, or are they capable of some success? Just as this tension builds, the scene cuts to a flashback with some gruesome details. Nevertheless, the reader may still feel the initial tension about the disciples’ ability.

It reminds me of the movie, “The Two Towers” from the “Lord of the Rings” trilogy. The climactic scene of that movie is the battle for Helm’s Deep, a rain-soaked orc barrage on the last stronghold for the people of Rohan. Peter Jackson, director of the movie, deftly cuts between the battle and the Entmoot, a meeting of the talking trees: slow, serene, the embodiment of inaction. Cutting away from the main plot to an important yet ancillary one creates even more tension, as the observer must wait for the real action to return.

**Typology:** Mark does not revel in the story of John the Baptist’s death only to create tension, however. There is a shape to John’s life that Jesus himself will share. John is a gadfly to those in power. He has specifically criticized Herod’s marriage to Herodias. The more pressing problem for Herod, however, is Jesus’ fame (and presumably that of John the Baptist, too). When word gets to Herod of a rabble-rouser, John is immediately brought to mind. Running afoul of those in power in this way does not end well for John. He ends up laid in a tomb. So also will it end for Jesus. While this episode is, on its face, a flashback, it simultaneously anticipates the end, it is a “flash-forward.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>C. Clifton Black, Mark (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 147.

<sup>2</sup>Black, Mark, 142. <sup>3</sup>Black, Mark, 157.

Source: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/jesus-rejected-sends-the-12-john-beheaded/commentary-on-mark-61-29-2>