

**The Deciding Factor**  
**Preached by**  
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**For reflection:** *"There is no level of greatness and power in which the lash of fear is not at least one strand in the whip of ambition."*  
Reinhold Niebuhr

**Hebrew Scripture:** *Psalms 24*

The earth is the LORD's and everything in it,  
the world and its inhabitants too.  
Because God is the one who established it on the seas;  
God set it firmly on the waters.  
Who can ascend the LORD's mountain?  
Who can stand in the holy sanctuary?  
Only the one with clean hands and a pure heart;  
the one who hasn't made false promises,  
the one who hasn't sworn dishonestly.  
That kind of person receives blessings from the LORD  
and righteousness from the God who saves.  
And that's how things are with the generation that seeks the Lord—  
that seeks the face of Jacob's God.  
Mighty gates: lift up your heads!  
Ancient doors: rise up high!  
So the glorious king can enter!

**Gospel Reading:** *Mark 6:14-29*

Herod the king heard about these things, because the name of Jesus had become well-known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and this is why miraculous powers are at work through him."

Others were saying, "He is Elijah." Still others were saying, "He is a prophet like one of the ancient prophets." But when Herod heard these rumors, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised to life."

He said this because Herod himself had arranged to have John arrested and put in prison because of Herodias, the wife of Herod's brother Philip. Herod had married her, but John told Herod, "It's against the law for you to marry your brother's wife!" So, Herodias had it in for John. She wanted to kill him, but she couldn't. This was because Herod respected John. He regarded him as a righteous and holy person, so he protected him. John's words greatly confused Herod, yet he enjoyed listening to him.

Finally, the time was right. It was on one of Herod's birthdays, when he had prepared a feast for his high-ranking officials and military officers and Galilee's leading residents. Herod's daughter Herodias came in and danced, thrilling Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the young woman, "Ask me whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." Then he swore to her, "Whatever you ask I will give to you, even as much as half of my kingdom." She left the banquet hall and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?"

"John the Baptist's head," Herodias replied.

Hurrying back to the ruler, she made her request: “I want you to give me John the Baptist’s head on a plate, right this minute.” Although the king was upset, because of his solemn pledge and his guests, he didn’t want to refuse her. So he ordered a guard to bring John’s head. The guard went to the prison, cut off John’s head, brought his head on a plate, and gave it to the young woman, and she gave it to her mother. When John’s disciples heard what had happened, they came and took his dead body and laid it in a tomb.

### **Meditation: *The Deciding Factor***

Midsummer seems a moment to take a break from some of the things we have been thinking about and think about different things, perhaps with a little more lightness of being. Things more personal, less national—although eventually our personal choices do play out in the public arena. To help us along the way, today’s Scripture reading has all the makings of a summer blockbuster merged with a few episodes of *Dynasty*. It has just about everything—dysfunctional families, adultery, murder ...

First, the Herod of this story is not the Herod who was Christmas time’s bad guy in Bethlehem. This is a descendant, Herod Antipas. This Herod was a tetrarch--ruler of one quarter an area that his ancestor Herod the great had ruled, and like his ancestor, he was put in place by the Romans. Mark called him a king, but he wasn’t. Mark knew that. Everyone knew that. Oh, this Herod wanted to be a king. He so regularly nagged the Romans in this regard, that eventually they banished him to Gaul to make the whining go away. Maybe Mark was making an ironic comparison between this earthly ruler with limited power over life and death and the King of kings who had ultimate power over life and death and life after death.

These households would challenge ancestry.com’s ability to chart a family tree. Here we go.

Herod Antipas had a brother who was also called Herod, but here called Phillip to lessen our confusion (hah!) The Herods were not Roman but Jewish and subject to Jewish law and practice. Herod Antipas was married to one woman, the daughter of a neighboring king. Herod Phillip was married to a woman named Herodias. (Apparently, there was a name shortage in the turn of the millennium Middle East.) Herodias was a niece of both Antipas and Phillip. Herod Antipas then married Herodias, his brother's wife. Not surprisingly, his first wife left him and returned to her father's kingdom—yet another blow for international relations.

Now, not only was Antipas' brother Phillip still alive—Phillip did not give Herodias a divorce. This meant Herodias was married to two living brothers at the same time. Bigamy was and still is a violation of most everyone's practice, especially for women.

Hang in there—because now it gets complicated :-). Herodias and her first husband (Herod Phillip) had a daughter named Salome. That made Salome Herod Antipas' niece (his brother's daughter) and grandniece (the daughter of his second wife, who remember was also his niece). With his marriage to Herodias, Salome became his step-daughter. Herod Antipas' family relations make Woody Allen's domestic arrangements look normal.

None of this was a secret to anyone. Contemporary legitimate sources, as well as *Access Hollywood*, would have been talking about these convoluted antics of the Herodian court.

Herod wasn't thrilled, but Herodias took special exception when the prophet John the Baptist publicly called them out for poor behavior, condemning the marriage as invalid. John the Baptist was arrested and put in prison where he might have languished for a long time.

At least until Salome danced for her step-father's guests at a feast. The word used in Greek is "little girl", not the sultry woman of movie image. The dance, in and of itself probably wasn't suggestive, but the setting of a little girl dancing before the guests at a time when men and women ate separately was—well—was borderline creepy, and about to get gruesome. Salome danced so well that Herod asked her to name her reward. She asked her mother, who told her to demand

John the Baptist's head. The "little girl" added the charming detail "on a platter."

According to the story, this ruler who respected and protected the prophet, felt himself trapped by his public promise to a little girl, and had John beheaded. We have to wonder—what the deciding factor was for Herod? What compelled him to do something he didn't want to do? Was it related to public opinion for a man who had so far resisted any response to public opinion? Was it because he just wanted the pressure from his wife to go away? Was it some sense of public obligation because of a promise he had made? Was it cowardice or fear of being overthrown? That wasn't logical. Herod's power relied on Rome, not on Jewish public opinion. Was it because he and the court were already aware of another rising prophet (Jesus) and it seemed they had one prophet too many?

There is much more detail in Mark's gospel than in any of the other descriptions of the occasion of John's death. Quite frankly, it's such a wonderful story, carefully crafted, that we need to question its historicity. We also have to wonder why Mark, who wrote a spare drama that moved with haste through its episodes, lingered here for a gruesome story. The only "immediately" in this story was when the little girl demanded John's head right away.

To understand a little better, let's look at where Mark placed the story of John's death—out of chronological order of Jesus' ministry.

Immediately before this telling, Mark records Jesus' sending of the Twelve, warning them they will not be welcome everywhere. The disciples cast out demons and healed people, proclaiming the need for changed lives. Immediately upon that report, Mark provided this cautionary Herodian tale for disciples. Apparently even the prophetic, effective and respected disciples of Jesus can be sacrificed for complex reasons over which they have no control.

Immediately after the record of the death of John, Mark reports the miracle of the fish and loaves. Mark offers a sharp contrast between two feasts: one staged for gluttony and entertainment, the approval of the powerful and ending with a brutal sacrifice for the sake of sustaining a public image; the other a foretaste of the kingdom of God, a feast where everyone is filled, where the host is characterized by compassion, not brutality, where the poor and hungry are fed, not the rich and powerful.

Mark was not finished (Sometimes, we have to wonder how he got the reputation for cobbling together a gospel.) This story points to the culmination of Mark's gospel—the passion. We will have the report of another ruler who kills another prophet, someone he respects and can find no wrong in, to heed public opinion, or needs for political stability, "because the little girl asked;" "because the people asked;" "because I made a promise;" "because it was the Passover tradition." Maybe the deciding factor was that—the built-in deniability—"it was out of my control; "I had no choice"—even from people with great earthly power.

If Mark wasn't just recording history, and everything about this story and its location in the gospel suggests he wasn't, then what would he have wanted faithful readers to do with it? How is it an instructive tale for us?

Few, if any of us, will be earthly rulers, will have the power of life and death over another human being. Yet all of us have the power to kowtow to the rich and famous, or those who are influential in our social lives or work lives. Every one of us has the power to use our resources to win public opinion with feasts or words or our power in our classroom or workplace or peer group. Every one of us has the power to be a bully (who are not limited to junior high classrooms and who learn it somewhere). Everyone of us has the power to get what we want by means available to us, be they words or money or unkindness or relentless pressure.

Mark invites us to consider the deciding factors for the choices we make. Will we do that which is less than faithful simply because we can? If it will not be known? If it will win us influence or the job we want or merely the small battle over a difference of opinion? If it will gain us short-

term satisfaction or relief from inconvenience? If we will be able to distance ourselves from the consequences or the choices – "I didn't know it would turn out that way"; "I had no choice" and other phrases of public deniability.

It is unlikely that our acts will be writ large in the history of the world, but if our private prayerful reflections reveal motivations akin to Herod's, Mark invites us to look at the preaching and healing by the disciples, a miracle of feasting with those who have no influence in the world, and the sacrifice of one who always used his power on behalf of others and not himself to remind us who and what we are called to be and do. Mark invites us to let our calling be the deciding factor in the choices we make.

### **Prayers for Others and Ourselves**

Loving God: Even in the midst of summer, we can come to you, a tired people. We have so many claims on our time; so many obligations overwhelm us. In the rush it is people who get lost—our friends and family members, even ourselves.

We struggle in the nurturing of our relationships. We try to strike a balance between independence and intimacy, but somehow don't often seem to get it right. We value our freedom of choice yet become angry when those we love make different decisions than we would make for them. We want to be closer to our friends and our families and our church, but we get scared when we realize that the price of closeness is risk and vulnerability. Give us the courage to be open. Let us dare to be known that we might also know.

Not only in our homes do we struggle, Lord, but in our hospitals and laboratories, in our schools, in our businesses and work places, and in the halls of government we make choices every day. Choices about how we spend our money, about how we treat our fellow workers and our customers, about what we teach our children, about how we care for our environment. In this information age, we find it easy to hide the impact of our decisions on people behind the numbers in our reports. We do not ask that you make the difficult decisions for us. We ask for your presence and guidance as we make them, seeking always to do your will.

We have come to this place seeking your support. Refresh us with your Spirit Lord. Ease our discouragement. Invigorate us in our fatigue. Help us to open ourselves to you, not just in this hour but in every hour. Guide our choices. Comfort us in every circumstance.

As, in silence, we lift up the decisions that confront us now, we pray that we discover new rhythms of living, that our lives might once again be joyous and graceful.

SILENCE

Hear our prayer Lord, our words and the ones your son taught us to pray when together ....

### **The Lord's Prayer**

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**