

## Jesus On Our Mind

By Rev. Todd Farnsworth

### Mark 6: 7-20



7 Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits. 8 These were his instructions: “Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. 9 Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. 10 Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. 11 And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” 12 They went out and preached that people should repent. 13 They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. 14 King Herod heard about this, for Jesus’ name had become well known. Some were saying, [a] “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.” 15 Others said, “He is Elijah.” And still others claimed, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.” 16 But when Herod heard this, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!” 17 For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, whom he had married. 18 For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” 19 So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, 20

*because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.*

Have you ever heard of a “tetrarch”? Do you know that word? It was newish to me as I prepared today’s sermon and I was intrigued by what I learned. For starters, Wikipedia was virtually worthless. It focused on Herod and waffled between Herod as a king or a tetrarch. This gives us the idea that a tetrarch is a person with some political authority, and I guess that helps. Wikipedia noted that as a tetrarch, Herod was known as a petty tyrant, in keeping with his family heritage. I’ll get to that later...

Fortunately, the Holy Spirit lead me to wonder if there was more to this tetrarch thing than Wikipedia had to offer and lo and behold I discovered on my book shelves, The Anchor Bible Dictionary which was given to me at my ordination 34 years ago. As I opened its dust covered pages I found it had a LOT more!

I’ll try to summarize what I learned about this form of government. It may seem foreign because it is quite different from what we’ve experienced in the United States.

- A tetrarch is the overseer of  $\frac{1}{4}$  of an empire. He is usually assigned/chosen by the head emperor. The tetrarch’s job is to keep the locals in line and make money for the empire.
- A tetrarch that is weak is sometimes referred to as an ethnarch. A tetrarch who is strong is sometimes referred to as a king. Herod Antipas (from our story) lives somewhere between tetrarch and king.

- His father, (Herod the Great) however, was known as “King of the Jews.” The title was bestowed upon him by the Roman Emperor Marc Antony around 40 BC after convincing the Roman Senate that Herod was the right man for the job.
- Herod the Great’s job as tetrarch was to subdue the Jews in the southern kingdom and fold them into the Roman Empire. Herod did just that by murdering his opponents and marrying into their family.
- Despite his power, as a tetrarch, Herod the Great’s power was completely dependent on Rome. He did not work for the people he governed but sought favor from the Empire so that he could maintain his position. In exchange for his these favors Herod the Great was given latitude to take what he wanted from the people. This lead to what the Anchor Bible describes as “odium” /hatred from his citizens. The puppet king took the blame while Rome reaped the rewards.
- Around 4 BCE, Herod the Great died and left his “kingdom to his 3 sons, one of whom is Herod Antipas (from our story).
- Unlike his brothers, Herod Antipas was a “hands on” ruler.
- Antipas demanded loyalty from his court and citizenry. He trusted noone. He checked any movement which he suspected might lead to an insurrection.
- Like his father, he married for convenience to further his material holdings as tetrarch. His marriage apparently caught the notice of John the Baptist who chastised Antipas and called him to repent.
- As tetrarch, Antipas had John thrown in jail for publicly challenging his authority.

So, tetrarchs had virtually unchecked authority over their citizens. Nobody but the Emperor of Rome (who put them into position) could call them to accountability. Given that dynamic, it is easy to understand how John ended up in jail. Herod literally held the keys to John's life.

Mark notes that despite all his wealth and power, Antipas was haunted by ghosts. The ghost of John the Baptist, in particular. John was the one royal sacrifice that got under Herod's skin and psyche. Perhaps because he found John amusing. Perhaps because he was intrigued by John's thoughts beyond his take on marriage. Perhaps because even though John had no power, he kept on coming after the tetrarch with something John called, "the Truth." Truth was not something Herod was very at ease with. His life had been a series of lies and manipulations to keep himself in power and good grace with Rome. He had cut a thousand deals to maintain his position and, I wonder if somewhere deep down he considered how fragile that position actually was? And now he was haunted by the murder of a man he knew was innocent...annoying...but innocent. Herod had killed John on the whim of his wife's ire. Herod thought that would end his wife's complaining. Herod thought it would end the challenges that John brought to his thinking. Herod thought it would just be one more body on the heap of his political career and nobody would take notice...including himself. What that man with all that power did not anticipate, was that John was not acting on his own impulses, but at the direction of someone bigger than himself.

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struggle between the church and state. While the tetrarch is shuddering at the news of his coming, Jesus and friends (unencumbered by a 24-hour news cycle that repeats the threats of the tetrarch against them and their mission) step out onto the world stage and begin doing what Jesus directs them to do. They set off in pairs (not alone) and “*They went out and preached that people should repent. 13 They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.*”

- They organized and cooked food for the homeless. They opened their hearts and spaces to serving those who were hungry, homeless, and alone.
- They sent “thinking of you” cards to folks who were ill or grieving and they visited those who could not get out, so that everyone knew that their pain was being lifted up to God in prayer.
- They gathered up stories of love and loss to share at The Flame and bravely took the stage.
- They hung Cupids from the rafters to teach children about the importance of God’s love.
- They gathered flowers in the winter to remind people of the Spring that was coming in God’s time.
- They preach and sing and pray at the local rehab center
- They voted when that right and responsibility became available to them.
- *What else did they do???*

Yes. All those things and more.

They turned their hearts and minds toward Jesus and allowed *him* to consume their days and nights, their weeks and years. It was an act of defiance to the tetrarchs who imagined themselves in control (and who, even though they didn't have Twitter accounts, could make life difficult for the faith community with policies and proclamations). It was an act of faith that gave purpose and hope to their lives. It was their joy in knowing that the one they followed would not betray them, but would lead them to eternal life, no matter what the tetrarch's whims were on any given day. They kept their minds on Jesus by starting their days with prayer. By giving thanks for God's blessings in their lives. By studying the stories that had given life to the faith community before them. By reminding each other of those stories whenever they got together. By going out into the world, trusting that they had the authority to minister in Jesus' name. And they did have that authority. And we do have that authority.

Even though we don't live in a time of tetrarchs, it's important to recall that our spiritual DNA is at odds with whatever government is at odds with Jesus Christ and his message of love, compassion, and justice. Powerful leaders will come and go. Herod was ousted by an emperor named Caligula who made things even worse for the Christian community. Despite the hardships, the Christians just kept on coming with the authority of Jesus. Like the words of our next hymn describe:

*How like a gentle spirit within us  
God reins our fervent passions day by day,*

*And gives us strength to challenge and to win  
Despite the perils of our chosen way.*

We are marching still, with gentle spirits, with Jesus on our mind. Amen.