

# *“An Admirer or Disciple?”*

*Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time*

*II Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29*

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From the Pulpit

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It is summer time and this Sunday's sermon comes not in an introduction, three points, and conclusion. Today's sermon comes in a story. Relax and sit back and ponder your life with the life of an ancient biblical story retold in a new way.

*Loving God, You are the Still Speaking God. You speak to us in many ways. Speak to us in story-telling, today. Amen.*

My name is Maximus Brutus. I was once known for my strength and my loyalty to Rome. I was also known for keeping quiet about my work, protecting great rulers established by Rome. Now, I am an old man, retired, drinking sour wine, and eating figs. However, my life was not always so tranquil.

Because of my strength and loyalty, I was chosen as a young centurion to guard the old man, Herod the Great. Herod the Great was quite the character. He was great because his armies made him great. He had five wives, the most famous being Cleopatra. The old man had nine sons, three with the name Herod and two with the name Philip, so it could be confusing. For instance, there was Herod Archelaus, Herod Antipas, Herod Philip and Cleopatra's son, Philip.

Herod the Great was always insecure. Always afraid of a coup d'état. When he came to power, one of the first things he did was kill forty-five of Jerusalem's wealthiest aristocrats and took

their property to pay debts. People lived in fear of his bloody sword and some wanted to kill him. Because of these threats and his insecurities, I was there with others as body guards. We were there also to protect him from the Zealots and enemies of Rome. Herod the Great had all these children, and willful and powerful wives wanting their particular son to rule one day.

In all of Herod the Great's insecurities there are two incidents I recall demonstrating his insecurities. First, there were these sages who came from the East. They came to witness the birth of one named Jesus, born in Bethlehem. They came with treasure chests of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold made sense for a king. Frankincense was a fragrant resin which also made sense for a king. Myrrh was used both as a resin for anointing and embalming. The anointing made sense for a king, but the embalming didn't make sense to me for many years. Herod the Great heard about these wise men and their gifts and quietly requested they come and see him. That sly devil told these sages that if they found Jesus, they were to come and tell him where Jesus was. Herod told them this was so he could also pay homage to the baby king. These sages, these wise men, they were apparently smarter than Herod the Great because after they found Jesus, they didn't return to Herod. They went home by another way. As I said, Herod the

Great was insecure. I know he would have killed the baby boy, if he could have found him. That leads to another incident demonstrating his insecurities.

When Herod the Great finally figured out he had been tricked by the wise men, he had all the children, two years or younger, killed in and around Bethlehem. Mothers cried. Fathers wailed.

They all wept because their children were ripped from their arms and were no more. My blood boiled. How could a benevolent king kill innocent children? But I, I did nothing. I was loyal to Rome.

Not too long after that massacre, Herod the Great died. The royal family mourned his death as they also scrambled for power. The people from Bethlehem did not mourn his death. They were still grieving the loss of their children. I was secretly glad the old man had died. However, my concern quickly shifted as to whom would rule and how they would rule now that the old man was dead. An old man full of insecurities and his sword that dripped with blood.

The first son named Herod Philip, married a manipulative woman named Herodias, and they had a daughter Salome. Herodias and Herod liked to party but not always with each

other, if you know what I mean. He was drunk much of the time and couldn't rule over anything, including his wife.

Another son named Herod Archelaus ruled much of the area you call Israel. Another son named Herod Antipas ruled much of the area you call Lebanon and Jordan. Another son named Philip ruled much of the area you call Syria and Jordan.

This is where the royal story gets rather strange. Herod Philip lost his wife to his brother Herod Antipas. They had quite an affair going on which was the talk of the whole region.

Everybody talked about it with hushed tones, so as to not get into trouble. Well, everybody talked about it with hushed tones except one called John the Baptist.

One day when King Herod Antipas and Herodias were out, they encountered John the Baptist. John bluntly told Herod Antipas and Herodias that he was sleeping with his brother's wife—not that it made any difference to his drunken-party-animal-brother. I stood between the king and John the Baptist, not knowing if the king would give me the order to strike him dead. King Herod respected John for speaking his mind but Herodias was mortified. She turned to King Herod and said, “Aren't you going to do anything? How dare John the Baptist speak to us that way!” Herod looked at Herodias and said, “He wasn't talking to you but to me. Furthermore, is

there anything he said which is not true?” She quickly got quiet, seething with revenge for someone questioning her place next to King Herod. King Herod, seeing the crowd felt caught. King Herod liked and respected John but this time he had gone too far. “Throw him into prison and let him cool off.” Some of the men in my command threw John into prison.

A few days later there was a large birthday party for King Herod. The party included members of the king’s court, officers, political leaders and the beautiful young maidens. These parties were excessive. People ate until they were too full, would regurgitate and eat more. People would drink until they were drunk. Sometimes these drunken revelers would turn a party into an orgy. On this night things had not gone quite that far. As a treat for the king, Herodias’ daughter (whom she had with her first husband) was asked to dance. Salome was her name. I was there at the party, on duty that night and sober. Salome danced. Everyone knew the girl that now had become a shapely young woman. She danced a sensual dance that had the eye of everyone in the room and was meant to tease and to seduce. When she finished, everyone’s breath was taken away for the moment, then wild applause. The king was pleased and he stood and said to Salome, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” “I

swear it,” said the king, “whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.”

Salome had the body of a woman but the mind of a little girl. She knew this wish was important but she had no idea how important, so she came to her mother and asked, “What should I ask for?” Now Salome was just a puppet for her manipulative mother Herodias. Herodias didn’t want half the kingdom, she wanted it all. So, Herodias said, “Asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” When Salome made her request to the king, the king was greatly troubled. He liked John the Baptist who had the courage to speak his mind. He also knew his sworn word would mean nothing if he did not keep his promise to the girl before his distinguished guests. The king nodded and guards were sent by me to the prison where John was. He was beheaded and his head was put on a platter from the royal kitchen.

Over the years I gave orders for many scoundrels to be killed but that order has bothered me to this day, to kill what I considered to be an innocent man.

Soon the soldiers returned with the head of John the Baptist on that platter. They gave it to Salome as she had requested. At first, she was disgusted by the sight and then, she smiled as she knew this would please her mother. When word spread of

John the Baptist's death, disciples of John buried his body. It was the decent thing to do. As for the party revelers, they continued the party with reckless abandon, as if there was no tomorrow, as if there was no reckoning for their actions.

Sometime later, Herodias' daughter Salome married her uncle, Philip. As I said, Herodias didn't want half the kingdom, she wanted it all. Herodias was married to Herod Antipas and when her daughter married Philip she had influence on two-thirds of the territory once ruled by Herod the Great. It was a rather dysfunctional family, a family I'm no longer required to guard.

As for Herod Antipas, he was quite the admirer of John the Baptist but that admiration didn't help John much in the end. I got to talk to John the Baptist one day while he was in jail. I told him of my respect for what he said and how he lived. He told me to put my respect in one named Jesus of Nazareth, for what he said and how he lived. Yet, Herod Antipas was merely an admirer of John the Baptist. John the Baptist was truly a disciple of Jesus.

Those loyal to Rome also killed Jesus. They were admirers of Jesus, too. People admired how he and his followers respected the lives of others, how they respected women, how they respected children, how they respected slaves, how they were loyal to an authority higher than Rome. As I said, some were admirers of Jesus.

When I retired I left the Roman guard and I joined up with those followers of Jesus. I never met Jesus of Nazareth but I had met John the Baptist. I've seen how the powerful live and I don't want that life of manipulation, power struggles, lying, cheating, and general excess. I would want to live and walk like John, not as an admirer but as a true disciple of Jesus. Jesus, the Sovereign over the Roman world and beyond. Amen.

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