

Herod's Memory Palace

Text: Mark 6:14-29

Hymn: "If Thou but Trust in God to Guide Thee" (LSB 750)

If you've read Joshua Foer's 2012 *Moonwalking with Einstein* or watched the BBC television series *Sherlock*, you've encountered the concept known as a "memory palace." It's a mnemonic device based on the fact we human beings are built in such a way that we remember places. You remember the house you live in or famous buildings you've toured or walks you've gone on. So, if you mentally put the parts of something you're trying to memorize in a different room, later on, you just walk through that building in your mind and that's how you remember. From the sixth century B.C. to the present day, very successful speechmakers and poets have used the "memory palace" as an aid to memory.

Today's Gospel reading takes us not just into Herod's palace but into Herod's *memory* palace. Mark invites us to peer into Herod's mind and see the pattern of associations that causes Herod to remember. Just before this, Jesus had sent out his twelve apostles with his authority to preach repentance and cast out demons and heal the sick (6:13). Reports of these extraordinary things had reached Herod and caused him to remember his extraordinary sin.

Extraordinary it was. Then again Herod was a man who took delight in the extraordinary. It was for this reason that he liked to listen to John the Baptist. John stood out as a righteous and holy man. He had visions of the future, preaching of One who would come after Him, one mightier than he and who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:7-8). John was an extraordinary man with an extraordinary message, such that even after Herod threw John in prison (either to appease his wife or protect John from

her), he went to listen to him. What John told Herod perplexed him, and yet Herod still “heard him gladly” (20).

Herod had ambitions for being a king; he even went to Rome to obtain the title but never got it. He delighted in hosting a banquet to celebrate his own birthday, in having Herodias’s daughter dance publicly before his guests, and in making a promise he could never keep. (Since he wasn’t really a king, he didn’t have a kingdom to give.)

Herod then demonstrated an extraordinary faithfulness to his rash words. Because of his promise, he had John the Baptist beheaded and his head delivered to Herodias’s daughter on a platter. Herod’s delight in the extraordinary—his pleasure, his ambition, his promises—filled his life with a haunting sorrow. And when the extraordinary did occur in the region where he ruled—lepers cleansed, the sick healed, unclean spirits driven out—Herod’s mental palace was filled with the troubling memory of his extraordinary sin.

Now Herod is an easy figure for us to despise. His sin is so extraordinary! It makes our sins seem like minor infractions, peccadilloes, rounding errors. Yet God’s judgment is clear. All sin is worthy of damnation in his sight. We may not live in palaces, give extravagant banquets, or make outlandish promises, but we, too, can be troubled by memories of our sin. Sin has a way of entering into the most humble home, the most holy environment, and turning it into a place of torment. We can suffer not because we remember beheading a prophet but because one little sin haunts us.

Herodias demanded John’s head on a platter in order to shut the Lord’s prophet up. But each of our sins, no matter how small from our worldly perspective, seeks to silence God’s Word. As Jesus declared in his Sermon on the Mount, anger with one’s

neighbor is a sin against God's command not to murder, a lustful glance is a sin against God's command not to commit adultery. While we might come to church on Sunday and listen to God's Word with pleasure, when we fail to respond to that Word, to put God's Word into action, to live according to God's will, we are silencing God's prophets. "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves," James writes.

Such sin makes this world a troubled place. Our sins haunt the halls of our memory as we recall that one moment of weakness, that one word we cannot take back, that one night we lost our purity, that one day we lost our temper, and we tremble in fear before a holy God.

But we do not despair, because Mark offers us a glimpse of an even more extraordinary story.

Notice how Mark sets the past sin of Herod within the context of the present ministry of Jesus. Herod hears of what is happening in the name of Jesus. With that one small reference, Mark leads us into something as big as the salvation of the world. Those of you who were in the Mark class this past year know how Mark loves the sandwich pattern of telling his stories, where a second story is embedded within the first. In this case, the account of Herod's extraordinary sin is embedded within an even greater story of extraordinary love.

Jesus has sent his disciples out to proclaim his Word and to cast out demons. He called them for this very purpose. They're entering the world with a life-giving Word. While Herod stands stuck in his troubled memories, Jesus is transforming the world with his transforming love. He enters the troubled places of our world and challenges us with a call to repentance, changes us with a proclamation of salvation, and transforms

us by his life, death, and resurrection into people who remember God's mercy and rejoice in God's love.

Herod, of course, missed all this! He missed this extraordinary work of God. But we didn't. Regardless of what sin you bring into this sanctuary today, you have come into a place of God's life-changing love. There is no sin that can separate you from the work of Jesus.

Today, in fact, Jesus continues the ministry begun in Mark 6. Through his Word, he calls us and everyone to repent. No sin is too small for God not to notice. All sin is worthy of damnation, and we stand today before a holy God troubled by the memories of our sin. Yet Jesus enters into the troubled places of our lives, bears the punishment of God's wrath for our sin, and dies and rises to bring us new life.

Jan Bender was a twentieth century hymn composer. We recently sang in church his "O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth" (*LSB* 834). He once carried a painful melody in his memory for over thirty years. And this memory was only overcome by the power of God's Word.

You see, Jan Bender was a student of the composer Hugo Distler. At the age of 34, Distler took his own life. He had been charged by the Nazis to write a melody to celebrate the triumphs of the Third Reich. He did, but the tune was far from triumphant. You can hear in the plaintive notes a cry of distress, of suffering under oppression. Such sounds, once heard, aren't easily forgotten.

They weren't forgotten by Jan Bender. He carried this melody in his memory for over thirty years until he finally published his variations on the theme. Yet even that wasn't enough. He then asked Dr. Martin Franzmann to put the music to words. The

result was Martin Franzmann's hymn "Weary of All Trumpeting." Franzmann's words capture the weariness of war, the ways of the world that kill, the songs that we sing that never bring true peace. But Franzmann also sings of the memory of Christ, dying in this world, dying for this world, dying and rising again so that all of his people, wherever and whenever they suffer, might never despair—never—but might hear above the din of noisy fallenness, that strong triumphant trustworthy word: "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).

Herod was afraid that John the Baptist, whom he beheaded, had risen. But we rejoice that God *has raised* the One we crucified and through him brings us life. In Jesus, we see the wonder of God's mercy, the extraordinary nature of God's love: God the Father sends his Son for our salvation; God the Son willingly endures eternal punishment for our sin and rises to send his Spirit to bring us life; God the Holy Spirit works through God's Word to turn us from sin, to bring us to Christ, and to awaken in us a memory of salvation and hope of eternal life. This is a memory we will never forget. The Apostle Paul, even when suffering in prison, sang of salvation because of this powerful memory of God's love. Christian martyrs throughout the centuries, while being tortured or torched, have sung hymns of praise because of this powerful memory of God's love. We, too, take into the hour of death a memory, more than a memory, a faith in Christ that no matter how small or weak that faith may seem, because it is in Christ is powerful enough to overcome the devil, death, and all sin, remembered or otherwise, and bring us at last to the kingdom which shall have no end.

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