



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



When the Popularity Runs Out

Acts 12:20-24

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August 4, 2007

The great first century Jewish historian Josephus wrote about this moment in his volume *Antiquities*. He tells the story that Herod wore armor that was very shiny and when the sun hit the armor and the people saw he, they believed he was a god from the way he looked.

Luke tells the story from the perspective not so much that he looked like a God, but sounded like a god.

In both instances Herod dies and is eaten by worms.

The story tells us about when the popularity runs out on Herod.

Just previous to this, Herod was popular. He had arrested and murdered James and received a major bump in the polls because of his cruelty. He then arrested Peter on the thoughts that by capturing the head of the church in Jerusalem, he was golden.

But things didn't work out. Herod's reign is in peril. He ends up seeing people he doesn't want to deal with. The people of Tyre and Sidon were starving and they were here to plead with him and he had to see them.

And something very unusual happens. The delegation from Tyre and Sidon come before him with the idea that flattery will get them everywhere. They begin to flatter him and say that he has the voice of a god; no, better than that, perhaps he IS a god. Herod is impressed with their vision of him and takes it all in and begins to think that he is a god.

But then, since he did not give honor to the Lord, he is struck down and eaten by worms.

The story has a couple of themes running through it. First, there is the issue of God and rulers or kings.

Many people like to look at St. Paul's statements in Romans 13 when he speaks about subjecting ourselves to local authorities. He is exhorting people to obey the law and do what is

required of them. Many people like to profess that civil authority, kings if you will, are doing the Lord's bidding.

However, if you read through all of Romans, you'll note that one of the obstacles to people are those same rulers, those same kings. Paul's words, in historical context, are more in telling people to maintain law and keep a low profile so as to not be murdered for their faith. While Christianity has honored martyrs, martyrdom is not celebrated, but mourned, and Paul is trying to keep more from being killed. If you take note, St. Paul defies civil authority on a regular basis. His words are often misread and used, by some, for their own purposes.

In reality, kings do not do well in the Bible. The first great king we encounter is the Egyptian Pharaoh who is an evil slave holder and is crushed by God.

Psalms 135 celebrates the killing of Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan.

Solomon is immoral and corrupt.

David is the best king in the Bible and he sins by having an affair with one of his closest friend's wife and sets his friend up to be killed.

Pilate represents Caesar and kills Jesus. Herod the Great slaughters the firstborn, and this King Herod is laying violent hands upon the Christians.

The problem with kings is that they often take themselves too seriously. They often believe that they have the ultimate authority. They become, in their own minds, gods and tyrants. But God does not honor tyrants.

Herod dies. Napoleon dies on the island of St. Helena a prisoner of the British. Hitler dies by his own hand in a bunker, Mussolini is hung upside down in the town square, and Saddam Hussein's death was shown over and over again, on *You Tube* as he was hanged to the taunts of people in the room.

Luke's words at the end, "But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents," is a reminder that kings who think that they are God, fail, and God never does. Acts of the Apostles tells us that when tyrants become demagogues and begin to hinder the preaching of the Gospel, they will always lose. We might honor kings, but God has no need to.

The second thing about this story is a contrasting image of deliverance and liberation.

Herod is speaking to a group of people representing a group of people he is starving out. Herod achieves power by oppressing others. If people do not bow down to him, he makes laws and does things to force people to bow down. His power comes from his cruelty. Deliverance and liberation from Herod comes from submitting to him to avoid his cruelty.

While God expects to be worshiped, God is not a God of cruelty. God is, in fact a God of love.

Going back to the Old Testament and stories of Old Testament kings, we read about the goodness of God over and over again.

In the Exodus story, God protects His people and leads His people out of Egypt. When the people are hungry God sends manna from the skies.

Jesus is killed by the king and lives again.

People are killed by kings and are born to eternal life.

The deliverance and liberation of God does not come from cruelty. Luke lays it out both in his Gospel and Acts of the Apostles. Over and over again Jesus meets people who are suffering. Over and over again Jesus heals those who are suffering. Deliverance comes from God and it comes not from God's cruelty, but from God's love.

The story, from a big picture perspective, speaks of great irony.

Luke wrote both his Gospel and Acts of the Apostles. He begins the story telling us that Caesar Augustus called a census and that Quirinius was the Governor of Syria. Herod was the King of Israel. Into the midst of great power a baby is born in a stable because there was no room at the inn. It is a story of people of great power, and a child being born to a peasant couple who didn't even have enough influence in their lives to find a bed to sleep in.

It is a story of power and powerlessness. But in Mary's Song she says:

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.

We finally begin to 'get it.'

At this juncture of Acts, Augustus Caesar is dead and gone. Quirinius is dead and gone. Herod is being eaten by worms.

The baby's followers had converted one of Caesar's own officers when Cornelius became a Christian.

The kings were dead, long forgotten. But the child born in the stable, the one born in great humility was the Savior of the world, and whose Word and presence could be stopped by no one.