

"Like One of the Prophets"

Who is Jesus? As we've looked at Mark, we've already said that this is one of the central questions that's being asked. Who is Jesus? We find in this passage, that people at that time were asking that question. Jesus in chapter 8 will ask the disciples as well, "Who do men say that I am?" Then Jesus will then turn and ask that question of them - "But who do you say that I am?"

And as we look at this passage, we'll see that people in Jesus' day were beginning to answer this question. Verses 14 and 15 draw us into that debate. Some said Jesus was John the Baptist, raised from the dead. Some thought he was Elijah, who had been prophesied to return - remember Elijah didn't taste death; he was taken up into heaven in a whirlwind by God. Others said that Jesus was like one of the prophets of old.

And so as we look at this passage for today, we'll be considering what it tells us about who Jesus is - and we'll think about his identity in the context of repentance. That is the message Jesus and his disciples had been preaching. We looked at that last week, as we saw Jesus sending out his twelve disciples to preach a message of repentance in light of the coming of the kingdom. And now here in our passage we see that word had spread about Jesus. Mark seems to connect these two events - word is spread about Jesus, not only because of Jesus ministry, but because of the work of the twelve disciples who had been sent out as apostles from town to town. King Herod was probably stationed at that time out in a fortress called Machaerus, which was quite a ways from Jesus' Galilean ministry, east of the Jordan on the Northeast corner of the Dead Sea. This meant that word had really spread. Jesus' ministry and the work of the disciples had been paying off. The word was out about Jesus. And yet as we see here, many people were hearing about Jesus, but didn't quite know what to think of him yet.

And as we think about the identity of Jesus in terms of his message of repentance, think about how that relates to John the Baptist. Remember, John had also coming preaching a message of repentance. At the beginning of Mark it says that John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, for the remission of sins (1:4). And John the Baptist had been sent as a forerunner to Jesus. He came ahead of Jesus to point to him and say, "Look! This is the Messiah - the one who was to come!" So John's message was very similar to Jesus' message. They both called for repentance in light of the coming Messiah and his kingdom.

And we see some of the fruit of John the Baptist's ministry here in our passage. In the gospel of Mark, the only thing we've heard about John the Baptist up to this point is found in the first half of chapter 1. We had seen that he had a ministry that called people to repent, but here in chapter 6 we see a live example of that. John had called King Herod to repentance because he married his brother's wife. John said that was against God's law, referring to Lev 18:16, which directly forbid this as a form of incest. It obviously was a form of adultery as well. Of course, Herod didn't want to hear that, and his new wife, Herodias, certainly didn't want to either. So, Herod did not heed John's call to repentance. Instead he threw John into prison. This prison seems to have been located at this same fortress in Machaerus, right on the edge of the wilderness, right around the general area where John would have been ministering in the wilderness.

Verse 19 says that Herodias especially held a grudge against John the Baptist. It was not enough that Herod had thrown him in prison. She wanted him dead. Yet verse 20 says that Herod protected John from his wife. Evidently Herod saw something in John that fascinated him. He recognized that John was a God-fearing man. Verse 20 suggests that Herod would even regularly call John in before him to speak with him, even while he was imprisoned. This a bit strange for Herod. Obviously Herod saw something important in John's message and witness, enough to even protect him from the anger of his wife, but not enough to actually listen to John himself and repent of his sin. His wife, on the other hand, completely rejected John's message, just waiting for that one opportune day (vs 21) to come, where she could finally have John killed.

And so this incident between John the Baptist and Herod and Herodias shows that John preached a message of repentance. So it should be no wonder why the guilty conscience of Herod might think Jesus was the resurrected John the Baptist. Jesus came preaching a message of repentance in the same way the John had been. That's what we saw last week. And as Jesus message spread, it struck a note in Herod's mind as being all too familiar. Except this time, Jesus message was also joined with power. Jesus' preaching also came with miracles. Verse 14 says that Herod attributed these works of power to the fact that John must have been raised from the dead - evidently Herod thought that if John were indeed raised, then it would be quite natural that he'd be endowed with new special powers. Of course this was all a bit superstitious on Herod's part, but the point is clear. There is something similar between the ministries of John the Baptist and of Jesus. They both were in a ministry that called people to repentance.

And as we think about who Jesus is, we realize that he stands in a long tradition of prophets calling for repentance. That's why some people in verse 15 thought Jesus was like one of the prophets of old. There had been a few hundred years since the Jews had received a prophet. John the Baptist broke that silence, so to speak, and so that is part of the reason why his ministry got so much attention by the people - especially when he heralded the coming of the Messiah.

And when we think about these prophets of old, we realize that they too had been preaching a message of repentance. The early prophets, such as Moses, were not as focused on that message. The earlier prophets like Moses were receiving the laws of God, establishing the nation of Israel as a nation under God, and seeking to lead the people in keeping God's covenant. But over time as the nation of Israel began to stray more and more from God's laws, we see a shift in the prophets. There is a shift in the prophets to become basically like covenant lawyers on God's behalf. The prophets took a turn toward litigation. They basically began to accuse the people with breaking God's covenant with them. They charged the people on God's behalf for failing to keep the stipulations of the covenant that God made with them. The result? The prophets declared that the sanctions of the covenant would be enforced against them. Instead of receiving God's covenant blessings, they would receive God's covenant curses. That's what the prophets had been doing in Israel. They came as a final warning saying, if you do not repent and start keeping the covenant, then the curses of the covenant will come upon you. And the climax of that curse was exile - that God's people would be conquered by a foreign nation and cast out of the Promised Land.

That's what we see the prophet's doing in the Old Testament. They were God's covenant lawyers to call the people to repentance. Even after God brought the people back to the Promised Land after the exile, God still sent some prophets to call them to repentance. Even after they returned from exile, many of the Israelites still were not keeping God's laws as they ought, and so those post-exilic prophets also called the people to repentance.

And so do you see why the people, when they heard that Jesus was preaching a message of repentance, began to try to identify him with different prophets? We've already talked about how Jesus' message was similar to John the Baptist. And clearly we can see how Jesus' message shared much in common with the prophets of old, and so that is why some were identifying him as either standing in that tradition, or maybe even that he was one of those actual prophets, returned from the dead. That's why some thought he might specifically be Elijah. People had asked John the Baptist if he was Elijah, but he said no (John 1). Since Elijah never died, it would make sense that he might return - he wouldn't even need to be resurrected. And the prophet Malachi (4:5) actually prophesied that Elijah would return before the great Day of the Lord. So people were on the lookout for Elijah to return, just as they were on the lookout for the Messiah.

And commentators often point out that there is even some similarity in this passage with Elijah and his situation, and John the Baptist's situation with Herod. Elijah had to go up against King Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel. Though Ahab was no saint, Jezebel was clearly the more wicked of the two, and actively persecuted the prophets of the Lord. John the Baptist also went up against a king and his wicked wife: Herod and Herodias. Elijah called King Ahab and Jezebel to repentance. John the Baptist called Herod and Herodias to repentance. Jesus continues to call all to repentance.

I hope my point is clear here as we talk about John the Baptist, Elijah, and the other prophets. All of these are prophets in Israel's history. They all had a consistent message of repentance. Jesus clearly stands in that tradition. That is why people were identifying him with that tradition. To that extent, we can affirm this identification of Jesus. Jesus was a prophet like these prophets. That is certainly true.

But we cannot stop there in identifying Jesus. Yes, Jesus is like these prophets in so many ways. His message was consistent. Some of the prophets, like Elijah, even performed miracles like Jesus did. Jesus came declaring God's word, and calling people to keep God's laws. In so many ways, Jesus is like these prophets of old - but we cannot stop there.

Because if we look at these different prophets, we see some ways that Jesus is *not* like them. Just look at each of the three options that people gave in this passage. First, John the Baptist. Is Jesus really exactly like John the Baptist? No. A couple things jump out of this text to confirm that. One, this passage shows that John didn't do miracles. Jesus did. Herod's superstitious explanation for that doesn't change that fact. Two, John died. He was beheaded. This passage ends with a very important editorial note in verse 29. His disciples heard of John's beheading, so they came and buried his body in a tomb. That information is not just given to us as an interesting note. It's given to say that John did *not* rise physically from the dead. John died and was buried, and to this day has *not* been physically raised (of course we believe his spirit is in heaven, but the resurrection of his body is yet to come at the last day with the rest of God's people). So, John died, and was buried, period - end of his story here on earth. But Jesus would die, he would be buried, but he would also rise again on the third day. And in his resurrection, Jesus would declare victory over death and that he holds all power over raising the dead, even over himself. Though John's ministry was like Jesus', these things distinguish him from Jesus.

Next, think about Elijah. Surely there are some important similarities with Jesus and Elijah. Elijah, as well as John the Baptist, faced persecution, which Jesus did as well. Clearly Elijah foreshadows an important aspect of Jesus - Elijah ascended up into heaven when his ministry on earth was complete. Jesus would also

ascend up into heaven when his earthly ministry was complete. Elijah also performed a number of works of power; his ministry was marked out by miracles, testifying that he was sent by God. And yet though both Jesus and Elijah did miracles, there is a difference between the two. Elijah was merely an agent of God who worked miracles through Elijah. Jesus was the God-man on earth, who executed miracles out of his own authority. But the most important difference between Jesus and Elijah is that Elijah did not taste death. This is quite an amazing thing for Elijah. Only one other person is recorded in Scripture as not having tasted death - Enoch. And though Elijah was like Christ in ascending up into heaven, his not tasting death showed that he was not Jesus. Jesus had to die for God's people, to bear our sins on the cross. Though Elijah's ministry was like Jesus', these things distinguish him from Jesus.

So Jesus is not John the Baptist. He is not Elijah. We've already said that he is like the prophets of old, preaching a message of repentance. But there is also ways in which Jesus is not *just* another one of the prophets of old. First, with the exception of Enoch and Elijah, they all died and went to heaven. As I said, Jesus would die, but also rise from the grave, and then ascend bodily up into heaven. Second, the prophets would characteristically say, "Thus says the Lord." Notice when Jesus preaches, we don't find him saying, "Thus says the Lord." I think a good example of this is the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. Jesus in that sermon, quotes some Old Testament laws, and then adds to the laws. But he doesn't give the new commands by saying "Thus says the Lord." He says "But I say to you..." Jesus spoke from his own authority, and the people even recognized it (Mt 7:28-29). He was not just a messenger. He was the message himself. And he was God himself, speaking the very word of God from his own authority. That's a big difference! Though the prophets' ministry was like Jesus', these things distinguish him from Jesus.

So all of this comparing and contrasting of Jesus with these different prophets is to make one important point. Jesus is the ultimate, final prophet. To put it in theological terms - he is the eschatological prophet. He is the prophet of prophets. He is the last and best prophet, because he is the first of prophets, the one who is God himself come to deliver his message.

But Jesus is not the ultimate, final, prophet, just because he is God himself. It's because of what Jesus did in his ministry. You see he is like the prophets in another crucial way - he offered hope. You see, the prophets, began to speak more and more about God's judgment because the people would not repent. But when the prophets spoke of this, they would also offer hope. They would offer hope of restoration and salvation. The prophets prophesied that after God judged Israel, he would one day restore the people through a Messiah and Savior. And they prophesied that the glory of this new restored kingdom would be even better than the first.

Jesus, as the ultimate, final, prophet, also shares that in common with the other prophets. He also declared hope. He came announcing the coming of this better kingdom. And he even announced its *imminent* coming. So Jesus spoke of God's plan of salvation. But he did more. He did not just speak of it as something only in the future. When Jesus came, that salvation arrived. He was that salvation. He embodied God's plan of salvation. He did not just proclaim restoration; he lived it out. He secured it. He was the restoration. Through him, we come into this new, better, kingdom! Through him we find salvation and deliverance.

And so in each of the different prophets in Israel's history, we see aspects of Jesus. We see aspects of the one who is the ultimate, final, prophet. All of the prophets of old are like Jesus, because they looked forward to him. And so if we

take all prophets together, as a whole, we see how they together paint a picture of Jesus. Jesus is the prophet. He is the prophet who not only spoke of God's coming salvation - he was that salvation!

Because of this, we do not look for more prophets to come. Jesus has revealed to us the will of God for our salvation. He has completed God's revelation to us. All the revelation looked forward to the coming one, to the Messiah. Now that the Messiah has come, the prophecies are complete. That is why Ephesians 2:20 says that the church has been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone. Jesus is the ultimate, final, prophet. He is God's first and last word to us. He has spoken to us in his Son, and through him he has given us the promised salvation. Jesus is the Messiah and the prophet of prophets - we are not to look for another!

There is also a sort of allusion to Esther that is seen in this passage, and that also points to the unique work of Christ. In the book of Esther, we see Esther at a banquet with the king. She finds favor with the king at this banquet, and the king in turn promises to grant her any request as well, up to half his kingdom. This is the same vow that King Herod makes in our passage to his step daughter who danced at *his* banquet. Of course, the response by Esther is completely different than this step daughter. Esther pleads for the life of all the Israelites. Esther pleads to save lives. The step daughter, however, is told by Herodias to use this opportunity to do her mom a favor - to kill an Israelite - John the Baptist. She plots to destroy an Israelite, not to save them!

Now Herod is exceedingly sorry it says in verse 26 when he hears his step-daughter's request, but of course he didn't do anything about it. He gives in to the request, more concerned about saving face than doing the right thing. The right thing would have been to realize that he had made a rash vow and publically repent of it. But we've already seen that Herod is not big on repentance.

But of course, it is in this event where we see who Jesus is. John the Baptist was murdered by this evil request by the step daughter. Jesus will meet his death as well. But in meeting his death, Jesus will bring the ultimate fulfillment to Esther's noble request made long ago. Esther desired that all Israel be saved. By Jesus death, the death of an Israelite, all Israel would ultimately be saved - in that all God's chosen people would find salvation by the death of Jesus. Jesus would die, be buried, and then be raised, and ascend up into heaven! By this passage alluding to the request of Esther, it draws us to contrast this senseless death of John with the coming death of Jesus on the cross. And as we think about that, we realize that Esther's request is ultimately fulfilled by Jesus. Of course, we've seen today how all the prophecies in Scripture have found their fulfillment in Jesus, the ultimate, final, prophet.

Trinity Presbyterian Church, who is Jesus? Jesus is *the* Prophet. He is also the Messiah. He is the King who has come to bring us into his new kingdom! The question of "Who is Jesus" is the question. Don't be like the people on the outside casually debating about who Jesus is. Wrestle with this question. Answer it. Believe that Jesus is whom the gospels declare. Believe that he is the Messiah. Believe that he came to bring salvation as all the prophets before him promised. Believe that he is your salvation.

Because Jesus is indeed the ultimate, final, prophet. He speaks to us the will of God for our salvation! He did that in his earthly preaching ministry. He did that in his actions as he went to the cross. He continues to speak that to us in the Bible. And he speaks to our hearts by his Spirit which convicts us our sins and works faith inside us.

And so I would call us all today to heed this message that all the prophets were bringing, Christ included. This message of repentance. We are called to repent. We talked about that last week, and I am renewing this call to you again today. Repent, and believe in the gospel. Repent, and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Turn from a life of sin, and embrace Christ and his will for your life. Repent, in light of the imminent coming of Christ's kingdom. This is a kingdom that you can be a part of even today. Spiritually, you can enter into this kingdom today by coming to Jesus in faith. And this is a kingdom that will physically arrive at any moment, when Christ returns to end this era of human history and bring us to our eternal destinies: damnation for those who reject Christ, and heavenly blessing for those who trust in him.

Maybe you are like Herodias? Maybe you are completely opposed to repentance. Maybe your heart is so hard, that you are waiting and biding your time, looking for just the right opportune time to satisfy your lust for sin. Maybe you are plotting your evils like her. Maybe you have a grudge against someone, that you can't wait to find revenge. Or maybe your grudge is against God? If any of this describes you, if you can relate to Herodias, I urge you to repent today. Turn away from your anger and hatred. Admit that you are a sinner, and come into the light. Find healing even today.

But maybe your sin is not as overt as Herodias. Maybe your actions are more like her daughter. Her daughter was effectively an accomplice in her mother's sin. Our actions can enable others to sin -- which is sin for us as well. Are you an enabler? Are you an enabler to someone's else's sins? We think about that in terms of things like alcoholism. People can be an enabler to someone else's alcohol additions. But we can be an enabler in so many ways, besides just in terms of addiction. There is a difference between helping someone, and enabling them. If your so called help, allows a person to remain in their sin, instead of lovingly confronting them and admonishing them to repentance, then you have sinned as well. For example, with the alcoholic example - if you call in sick to work for the alcoholic, lying about his symptoms, then you are effectively an enabler. Of course the opposite extreme can be that we come off judgmental, which is not good either. But there is a right balance. We must lovingly admonish those who deal with sin, not find ways to support and advance their sin.

Lastly, maybe your sin is more like Herod's. What an interesting character he is. We read in Luke that after hearing about Jesus, Herod desperately wanted to have an audience with him. But, when he finally did, he mocked Jesus, because Jesus wouldn't give in to his desire to give a miraculous sign to him. That seems so typical of Herod. Herod obviously had some religious notions and good intentions, but would never execute them fully. In our passage, he is clearly conflicted. He knew John was righteous, and so wouldn't put him to death, even though he imprisoned him. He must have felt the pressure from Herodias in the first place to put him in prison. He clearly was fascinated with John as a religious person, as we see him calling John regularly speak to him, even while imprisoned. Herod clearly had a sense of guilt for killing John. Not only did Verse 26 say that he was exceedingly sorry that his step daughter forced his hand to kill John, but afterwards, he seems to have a guilty conscience, afraid that Jesus was John raised from the dead. Maybe he thought John had come back to haunt him. A guilty conscience is usually a good starting point toward repentance. And yet, Herod just seemed so conflicted. He was full of guilt and fear. He even had some religious tendencies and notions. But he was not willing to do what he was being called to do: repent.

Instead he would give in to temptation. When he made a rash vow, instead of taking the more difficult step of losing face and refusing to honor the request to kill

John, he took the easy way out. And yet Scripture tells us that no temptation is greater than we can bear, but that God will always provide a way out (1 Cor 10:13). Repentance involves seeing the way out of our chronic lifestyles of sin, and taking that road instead. We can all be like Herod at times, knowing the right thing to do, even feeling guilty about it, but still just not doing it. Let us repent of that hypocrisy and follow Christ.

In closing, I'd like to point you back to the power of Jesus. If Jesus is the ultimate, final, prophet, that means he calls us to repent, but he also announces salvation. Our repentance is part of that salvation. It's a saving grace that he gives us. So if you want power over your sins, if you want to make progress in repentance, flee to him. Look to him, not just for forgiveness, but also for growth. And indeed, he will be faithful to give it. Praise be to him! Amen.

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