

Herod & Peter

Three weeks ago, we looked at a story in The Acts of the Apostles with two main characters, in that instance Barnabas and Ananias, and I promised you that we'd be doing another "compare and contrast" study in Acts later. So, here we are with chapter 12 of Acts, another story in which Luke, the assumed author of the book, teaches important things about the Beloved Community through two quite different characters, one whom we know exceedingly well and one who is far less known to us. On the one hand, we have Simon Peter, the "old fisherman" and the Rock on whom Jesus built his Church, at least according to our Catholic sisters and brothers. On the other hand, we have one of the Herods. "One of the Herods?" I hear you ask. Yes, there were at least three men so named in the scriptures and this one is neither the worst nor the best. I'll explain in a minute.

But for those who've not been hearing these stories from the New Testament for decades, let's spend a moment getting reacquainted with Simon Peter. We learn near the beginning of each of the Gospels that Simon and his brother, Andrew, were fishermen and, along with James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were also fishermen, were among the first whom Jesus called to follow him as disciples. The Gospel According to John has a slight variation on the story. In the Fourth Gospel, we read that Andrew had been a follower of John the Baptizer and had been told by John that Jesus was the one they'd all been waiting for. Andrew then left the Baptizer and began to follow Jesus, recruiting his brother Simon as he did so.

In those days with Jesus, we get a picture of Simon in the gospels of a headstrong man, impetuous, courageous, and sure of himself, sometimes to his detriment. He is quickly seen as a leader of the disciples, one who is not afraid to ask the Teacher questions on behalf of the others. He is the first to proclaim his belief that Jesus is the Messiah, for which Jesus gives him the nickname of Peter – Cephas in Aramaic, Petros in Greek; both words mean "stone" or "rock." Today, we might call him "Rocky," and the nickname may have been ironically meant by Jesus. Peter, after all, was a pretty changeable guy. No sooner had he called Jesus the Messiah, "the Christ" in Greek, but he told Jesus to stop talking about his impending death, saying he didn't know what he was talking about. "Get out of my way, you Adversary," said Jesus, or, using the Biblical expression, "Get thee behind me, Satan." There were incidents in which Peter panicked. "Depart from me, o Lord, for I am a sinful man," he said to Jesus once. And there was the time he tried to join Jesus walking on the water, but lost faith and started to sink. Or the time when he told Jesus that Jesus shouldn't wash his (Peter's) feet, then told him to go ahead and wash his head and whole body as well. Or the time he bragged that he would never deny Jesus, then did so just hours later. It was Peter, too, who cut off the ear of one of the men who'd come to arrest Jesus, only to have Jesus tell him to knock it off as he healed the injured man. Peter was, to borrow a phrase from that great character Michaelen Flynn in the classic movie, "The Quiet Man," "im-pet-u-ous!"

Does that capture Peter for you, as we know him from the Gospels? In a minute, we're going to talk about some changes in Peter but first let's take a look at the bad guy in this story. "King Herod," Luke calls him. But you might be surprised to know that this is not the same man that Luke calls "King Herod of Judea" in The Gospel According to Luke, chapter one, nor the man Luke calls "Herod, ruler of Galilee" in chapter three and chapter 23 of the Gospel. In fact, the region we now know as Israel-Palestine had four rulers called Herod during the New Testament era, which is really not many considering the eighteen Louis who ruled France or the eight

Henry's and eleven Edwards in England. The history of the Herods is quite complicated but I'll try to give you a Cliffs notes version. The first Herod, later known as Herod the Great, was an Idumaean, or, to use Old Testament terminology, an Edomite. That means he was a descendant of Esau, Jacob's brother. Today, the descendants of the Edomites are lumped together with other tribes under the heading Arabs. The Edomites, or Idumaeans, had been forcibly converted to Judaism by John Hyrcanus, one of the Hasmonean kings of Israel, around 125 BCE. John Hyrcanus' grandson, Hyrcanus II, came to the throne with the assistance of a scheming Governor of Idumaea by the name of Antipater, who had the backing of first the Roman general Pompey and then the great Roman general, Julius Caesar. The connection between the family of Caesar and the descendants of Antipater was to determine the government of the Promised Land for over a century. First, Julius Caesar appointed Antipater as Procurator of Judea, a post later held by Pontius Pilate. Antipater's son, Herod, married into the Jewish ruling family and, during a civil war among those rulers, maneuvered himself into being named tetrarch, or subsidiary ruler, by Mark Antony. When the war ended with all of men of the Hasmonean dynasty dead or exiled, Herod proclaimed himself basileus, King of the Jews, by virtue of his marriage to the princess. It all sounds rather "Game of Thrones," doesn't it? In fact, I think "The Herods" would make a great costume mini-series, like "The Tudors," or "The Borgias."

That first Herod, later known as Herod the Great, is so known for his many public building works, including a magnificent restoration of the Jerusalem Temple. But he is also remembered for his ruthless cruelty, which led him to execute his wife and three of his sons for plotting against him. His friend, Caesar Augustus, is reported to have said, "I had rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son," playing off Herod's adherence to Jewish dietary laws. And The Gospel According to Matthew tells us that Herod had all the baby boys in Bethlehem slaughtered after the magi told him that the King of the Jews had been born there. After the death of Herod the Great, the Romans divided his kingdom among his surviving sons. Herod Antipas got Galilee, and this is the Herod who was active during Jesus' life and to whom Pilate sent Jesus for questioning. Those who are fans of "Jesus Christ Superstar" will remember that chillingly delightful vaudeville number, "Herod's Song" – "So, you are the Christ, yes, the great Jesus Christ! Prove to me that you're no fool; walk across my swimming pool!"

But the Herod of this story is nephew to Herod Antipas and grandson to Herod the Great. Herod Agrippa was brought up in Rome, as befit a young royal, and made friends of two men who would later be Emperors of Rome: Caligula and Claudius. They say you can tell a lot about a person by their friends and if you know a bit about Roman history, you probably know those men, especially Caligula, are remembered for rather vile histories. When he came to the throne, Caligula gave his pal Agrippa the rule of territories which had previously been under two of his uncles, Phillip and Lysanias, and later added Galilee to his portfolio as well. When Caligula was murdered and then succeeded by Claudius, Agrippa received Judea, Samaria, and Idumaea, in return for backing Claudius. In fact, for three years before his death in AD 44, Herod Agrippa ruled over a kingdom as large as that of his grandfather, Herod the Great. His son, usually known as Herod Agrippa II, succeeded him. He comes into the story of the Acts of the Apostles later, in incidents with Paul. Interestingly, Luke only ever refers to him as "Agrippa," apparently wishing to differentiate him from the rest of the Herods.

If we are looking for points of comparison between Peter and Herod Agrippa I, we might safely say that they both took their adherence to at least some Jewish laws quite seriously. Just before the passage we are looking at this morning, in Acts 10 and 11, is the story of how Peter received the vision from God giving him permission to eat “unclean” food, thereby allowing him to have table fellowship with Gentiles. As Peter says in his dream, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” And Caesar Augustus’ dark joke about Herod the Great would not have worked had Herod and his family not kept kosher. The adherence of the various Herods to at least the dietary laws of Moses was part of what helped them stay in power over their Jewish subjects. Charles Talbert, author of Reading Acts, comments, “(Herod Agrippa) was as loved by the Jewish establishment as his grandfather was hated.” Our first lesson for the morning, then, as so many passages in the Bible teach, is that outward show of religion has very little to do with the true condition of the human spirit, which is, after all, what is important to God.

So, let’s move to the first of many contrasts between Agrippa and Peter. Our passage begins with the execution of James, the son of Zebedee, by Herod. “After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.” Herod Agrippa makes life and death decisions on the basis of what will win him points with the populace rather than from any deeply held conviction. He does what is expedient. He reminds me of Caiaphas, the High Priest, who famously says to the Sanhedrin in John 11:49-50, as regards Jesus, “You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” That’s another wonderful moment in “Jesus Christ Superstar,” by the way.

Simon Peter, on the other hand, will not be deterred from following the will of God by what people think. In Acts 3 and 4, we read the story of how Peter and John heal a crippled beggar in the Temple, drawing a crowd to whom Peter then preaches the Good News of God through Jesus. The two apostles are subsequently arrested and hauled before the Sanhedrin, the same men of whom Peter was so frightened that he had denied knowing Jesus just months before. As I mentioned, Peter has changed since the death and resurrection of his Teacher. Now, he has the courage of his convictions. When the council orders Peter and John to cease preaching in Jesus’ name, Peter demurs. “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” Herod Agrippa keeps his ear finely tuned to the political winds of the moment; Peter, on the other hand, cares not at all for politics.

But it is in their conduct in this morning’s story that we see the real contrast between Herod and Peter, as their actions reveal their characters. Peter has matured in remarkable ways since the death and resurrection of Jesus. Confronted by almost-sure death, he goes with his captors peaceably – no last stand in the garden and cutting off of ears this time. In fact, so calm is Peter in the face of death that Acts records the angel sent to release him has to tap him on the side to wake him up. And when Rhoda, the servant of John Mark’s mother, Mary, fails to let Peter in the house due to her excitement, Peter simply stands calmly at the door continuing to knock. Meanwhile, Herod Agrippa is throwing a fit. Hearing that his prize prisoner is gone, he goes and starts a search for Peter himself – hardly the composed action of a king with hundreds of soldiers at his command. Along the way, of course, he has Peter’s guards executed for allowing the escape, showing that the Herods are ever in favor of violence. By the way, plenty of

commentators point out the comedy of the Rhoda incident and some point out the absurdity of Herod's response as well. If the story of the Herods over their generations is something out of "Game of Thrones," this whole story might be a script for Monty Python. If we could go back to their heyday to give them the script, I'd cast Michael Palin as Peter, using one of his slicked-hair, slack-jawed, bespectacled characters to portray the preternaturally calm Peter being led by the hand by an angel and then patiently knocking at the door after being abandoned by Rhoda. Meanwhile, John Cleese, in one of his patented rages, would make a perfect Herod.

Peter, so calm and self-possessed in this story, has come a long way from the blustering fisherman he was. He has learned humility in the face of God. Herod, as we see from the end of the story, has learned no such humility. Praised by the populace for having "the voice of a god," Herod betrays the emptiness of his Judaism by accepting their acclaim without giving glory to the One God. Consequently, "an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died." His pride, the Greeks would call it hubris, is his downfall. Interestingly, the great Jewish historian, Josephus, tells a very similar story about the demise of Herod Agrippa. In Josephus' version, it is Herod Agrippa's appearance that is praised as godlike, rather than his voice, but the result is the same. According to J. Bradley Chance in his volume on Acts for the "Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary," "Josephus specifically says what Luke only implies, namely that Agrippa's failure to rebuke such divine accolades led to Agrippa's illness, which began with a severe stomach pain and eventuated in his death five days later."

And so, we have on one side, Peter: a poor fisherman who has learned humility, calmly facing adversity, serving God before humans, a father of the Church, remembered by millions of Christians around the world. On the other side, Herod Agrippa: a rich and powerful king, confidant of Roman emperors, who rages when crossed, acting out of political expediency, who is remembered today, if at all, as a sort of darkly comic bad guy, barely distinguishable from the rest of his scheming, violent family.

The obvious lesson is that the plans God has for the Beloved Community cannot be stopped by even powerful humans. The arc of the moral universe, no matter how slowly it bends, does bend toward justice. We may also be reminded of the words of Mary, mother of Jesus, in her great song of praise, the Magnificat, also found in the writings of Luke. God lifts up the lowly, the fisherman and prisoner, Peter, while casting down the mighty Herod from his throne. Both of these reminders are important for us so that we may continue to be courageous and principled in the face of pandemic, economic upheaval, and need I mention, climate change. We are called, like Peter, to be faithful servants of God, proclaimers of the Good News and good stewards of the creation. But we should also remember that God's plan will be done and that God intends life, abundant and everlasting, for all God's children.

We should also remember, from this story, the power of prayer. Luke writes, "While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him." In fact, they are still praying when Peter shows up at the door. But when Rhoda tells them that Peter is there, they don't believe her. Can you imagine? Rhoda runs in to the prayer meeting: "Mary, everybody, Peter's at the door!" "Shhh... don't interrupt; we're praying for Peter!" There's an old story about a town in the midst of drought that holds a prayer meeting to petition God for rain. Of all those who gathered to pray, only one brought an umbrella. Now, we know that God does not always answer our

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prayers in the way we expect, but God does answer, and we must be ready to see what God has sent us and to follow the new path that God has made possible for us. We may have to change our ways of doing things, even as Peter changed to meet the new challenges God laid out for him. But wouldn't we rather change and grow, like Peter, instead of being trapped in our family's broken way of doing things, like Herod Agrippa?

For the lessons of Peter and of Herod, for the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, thanks be to God! Amen.