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"Perplexed, Befuddled, Confounded.....Faithful"
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West Side Christian Church

Mark 6:14-29

If you have been alive in the last two weeks, you cannot help but know that Michael Jackson died on June 25, 2009 at the age of fifty. Jackson's story is such a complicated one, isn't it?

A childhood star who rose to fame at an early age. An abusive household and demanding career that disallowed him to have a true childhood. He changed the face of music and became the king of pop. His face physically changed, presumably from surgeries and other procedures because of dissatisfaction with his self-image.

Jackson's music broke racial barriers and brought people of different ethnicities together. The cloud of child abuse will always be part of his legacy because of the allegations made against him both in and outside of the courtroom. Jackson will always be known for his generous charitable giving as a celebrity. Jackson will also be known for squandering millions of dollars and leaving this earth virtually broke.

Jackson's story is a mixed bag. It is a complicated web of highs and lows, of light and darkness, of good and bad. It is a myriad of complicated relationships within his household and within society. It is a story that can be described as perplexing, at best: a story of fame, fortune, eccentricity and oddity.

Jackson's story came to mind as I read this story from Mark, about King Herod, again this week. In fact, Mark even uses the word "perplexed" to describe Herod in this particular reading.

To summarize, John the Baptist had gone to Herod and told him that Herod's marriage was a moral outrage. (Herod had broken up his brother's marriage in order to take Herodias as his wife.) Of course, Herod did not like John's words, but Herodias was so infuriated that she wanted to kill him. Herod, who spent most of his time trying to please people, decided on a compromise, and had John the Baptist locked up in prison.

Things come to a head, if you will pardon the expression, when Herod throws a birthday banquet for himself. The entertainment for the evening is provided by the family lotus blossom, Salome, who dances up such a storm that Herod tells her that she can have anything she wants.

When Salome asks her mother, Herodias that for which she should ask, Herodias replies, "Ask for the head of John the baptizer!" Salome returns to the

party and makes the demand, adding her own personal touch by requesting that John's head be served on a platter as the last course at the banquet.

Herod loves John the Baptist and considers him a prophet. Thus, Herod does not want to grant the request, but he cannot afford to lose face in front of his wife or his VIP guests, who have heard Herod make his foolish promise. So, John the Baptist is executed and the disciples come and lay his body in a tomb.¹

Just as it may be easy for us to judge the confounded life of Michael Jackson, it might also be tempting for us to quickly judge the befuddling life of King Herod. Before doing so, consider the personal and social dilemmas in which Herod finds himself in this passage:

Herod is trying to negotiate a multitude of relationships and circumstances in both his private and public life. He finds in this particular story that it is extremely difficult to please everyone around him and still uphold his own personal standards. He is at odds with his wife over John the Baptist and at odds with John over this wife. He is eager to appear a generous and trustworthy leader among Galilean society and troubled by his daughter's request for John's execution. His relationship to John evokes feelings of fear, perplexity, and protectiveness. Herod is quite conscious of how social perceptions shape one's possibilities in life, yet he is also seeking some measure of truth by which to guide his life choices.²

While *our* lives may not be as dramatic as kingship over a people or heads on silver platters, I think Herod's life still looks an awful lot like ours. Daily life presents a series of Herod-like personal and spiritual dilemmas for all of us to negotiate.

For a harried mother of a toddler, there is the question of how best to love and parent a child in the face of a defiant "No!" and a full-fledged temper tantrum in aisle 6 of the grocery store at the end of a long day. For a father of three, it is the struggle to explain the importance of rearranging travel plans for a work trip so he can attend a Little League playoff game.

A corporate executive wonders how her announcement of a long-awaited pregnancy will affect her employee's perceptions of her as an effective boss. A stay-at-home dad wrestles with the whisper of former colleagues that say he just couldn't handle the pressures of work.

Teenagers experience the angst of competing for acceptance in desirable social cliques, of perpetual broken hearts in the complex world of adolescent dating, of family tensions over privileges and responsibilities. Younger children long for

¹ Adams, Joanna. "A Terrible Text." *The Christian Century*. June 28, 2003.

² Yust, Karen Marie. "Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Word*. Proper 10 (Sunday between July 10 and July 16 Inclusive). Mark 6:14-29. Pg. 236.

popular toys advertised on television, worry about parental fights and the potential or actual breakup of their families, and wonder if the trouble they have learning multiplication tables or basic grammar means that they are somehow inadequate.

At every stage of our lives, we question who we are and how we should act as life pushes us and pulls us in conflicting directions. And, as in the story of Herod, there are always lives at stake as we decide which actions we will take.³

While Herod wielded a great deal of power over all those he reigns, it is the most vulnerable who loses out by his decision in this story: John the Baptist was imprisoned and, therefore, had no power. It is the most vulnerable who are always affected by our decisions. However, these decisions are never easy and the faithful decision is almost always not very clear.

Infants die when campaign promises to cut health-care expenses result in the closure of public health centers without alternative means for the poor. On the other hand, many working families struggle to make ends meet when national debt erodes the value of the dollar and drives up prices. If they cannot afford health insurance, their children are also vulnerable.

Military alliances may draw soldiers into conflicts weakly supported at home, placing young people at risk because of promises made by their elders. Conversely, persons around the world may die as a result of nationalistic “ethnic cleansing” movements if the militaries of other countries do not intercede on their behalf.⁴

As a pastor, I deal with complex decisions like these every day, just on a smaller scale. Do I assist the person who comes into the office from the community, having an outrageous outstanding balance on their electrical bill, knowing they allowed this bill to get out of control, but also knowing all of the other social programs cannot help them because of their particular circumstances, and that if I don’t help, it will get even worse?

Do I challenge the congregation to give more of their time, energy, and resources knowing that people are already stretched and worn down, knowing that we are in the midst of a troubled economy, knowing that some who cannot afford it will be compelled to give more?

Do I attend the church function at the end of a long week, knowing I am expected to be there, wanting in fact to be there, but also knowing that I have not been able to spend any real quality time with my own family?

³ Ibid, 238.

⁴ Ibid, 240.

On Tuesday night, I found myself watching a Prime Time Special on the media's predictions about what will happen now to Michael Jackson's children. The story was full of, what seemed to me to be, odd scenarios and relationships.

There is Jackson's marriage to the mother of his children, but then an amicable divorce and settlement, followed by her relinquishment of any parental rights to the children. Then there is his brief marriage to Lisa Marie Presley. There is a nanny that has been caring for the children their whole lives. Jackson's will gives full parental rights to Jackson's mother; after she dies to Diana Ross.

Here I was focusing on this perplexing scenario again, watching this whole Michael Jackson saga unfold, judging Jackson's decisions, worried about what his children will go through as a result of his legacy. On the one hand, they will have wealth, education, and means beyond any child in the world. On the other hand, they will be hounded and followed by the media for the rest of their lives, questioned regarding the truth about their father and all the rumors that surround his baffling life.

All of the sudden, I thought to myself, "What am I doing? Would I want Harrison sitting here watching this show with me? Do I want to encourage him to be a voyeur, to look in on the lives of celebrities with great interest and spend his time contemplating and judging their decisions rather than his own?" Immediately, I turned off the television, I went to bed, and I lay there thinking:

How often do I make selfish decisions, rather than decisions that are best for the most vulnerable people in my life, including my own child? How often does my public life and profession become more important than my family or even my own well-being? How often do I make ridiculous promises that I really should not or do not need to make? How often do I really even contemplate whom my decisions will ultimately affect? How often are we just like King Herod?

Amen.