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The Acts of the Apostles
XV. Herod Persecutes the Church
Acs 12:1-24

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Three different King Herod's appear in the New Testament story, and all three act as enemies of Christ. The first of them is Herod the Great, who ruled over the land of Israel at the time when Jesus was born. When Caesar Augustus sent out his decree that all the world should be enrolled, Herod the Great was the one enforcing that edict in the Holy Land. And when word came to Herod the Great from a group of visiting wise men that a new and rival king had been born to the people of Israel, Herod the Great responded by sending his soldiers to slaughter every male child under the age of two in Bethlehem and the surrounding areas.¹ So Herod the Great tried to kill Jesus, but failed. Instead, as our passage this morning puts it, "*the word of God increased and multiplied.*"

The second Herod to appear is Herod Antipas, who ruled during the days of Jesus' earthly ministry. This is the Herod who was in Jerusalem when Jesus was arrested by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. In fact, Pilate tried handing Jesus over to Herod. Herod greeted the captive Jesus with excitement, demanding to see some of those miracles he had been hearing about. But when none were forthcoming, He dropped the pretense and sent Jesus back to Pilate with cruelty and contempt.² So this Herod was complicit in Jesus' death – but, of course, we know how that ended, with Jesus raised from the dead. And, once again, the word of God continued to increase and multiply.

And now we come to this morning's Herod, Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great and the nephew of Herod Antipas. This Herod is a rather crafty politician. He comes up with a brilliant, if evil, plan to win favor with both Caesar in Rome and the Jews in Jerusalem – no mean feat, since these are at opposite ends of any political calculation. He arrests James, the brother of John, and has him put to death with the sword. With one stroke – no pun intended – he thereby shows Rome that he is a strong ruler in control of the land he governs; and, at the same time, curries favor with the Jews in Jerusalem who are growing increasingly hostile toward this new Jesus movement springing up in their midst and threatening all the old ways. In fact, that plan goes so well, that Herod decides to up the ante with a phase two. James was a minor figure in the fledgling church – but if everyone cheered the killing of James, he calculates, how much more will they love me, in Rome and in Jerusalem, if I have the ringleader of this Jesus cult, Peter, put to death.

Which brings us to our story. Herod has Peter arrested – but this time, unlike with James – he plans to make a big show of the execution. He is going to have Peter killed in front of all the

Jews in Jerusalem, just as soon as the Passover celebration is finished. He puts Peter in jail and – perhaps remembering what happened with his uncle and Jesus and the empty tomb – he sets a ridiculous number of guards to keep an eye on Peter. Four squads of guards – at least sixteen men – are guarding Peter at all times.

And that's when it happens. The very night before Peter is to be publicly executed by Herod, Peter is sleeping in his prison cell with one guard on his left and one on his right. There are guards at the door to his cell, and even more guards out in the holding area. No possible chance of escape. Peter is even bound to the floor with heavy iron chains. When suddenly an angel appears, wakes Peter up and says to him, "*Get up quickly.*" And then the heavy iron chains just fell off Peter's hands – Houdini never had such an escape! Peter gets dressed and follows the angel right past the entire garrison of guards as if he were invisible. And, before you know it, Peter is free. Even Peter struggles to believe that what is happening is really happening, because it seems impossible – more like a dream. Only when he is outside the prison, free and breathing in the cool night air does it really seem to him to be real. After coming to himself, our passage says, he then said to himself: "*Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.*"

The Great Escape. In a sense, a lot like the original Passover itself which, remember, was being celebrated while Peter was in jail. The original Passover great escape when God did the seemingly impossible and delivered His entire people from out of their captivity in Egypt.³ Or even, speaking of great escapes, like Jesus' own escape from death and from the sealed tomb, which also took place right after Passover. There were Roman guards there that night also – but they were utterly powerless before the power of the God who exceeds and excels in making a way out of no way for His purpose and for His people.⁴ The Great Escape – this God who exceeds and excels in making a way out of no way, a way out of dead-ends and closed doors and even hopeless circumstances for His people.

But, I confess, the note I find most interesting in this great escape story is not the escape itself, but the fact that Peter was sleeping soundly on the night before his execution – that it actually takes some effort on the angel's part to get Peter to wake up so that he can escape. Our story says that the angel actually had to prod Peter with his foot to get Peter to stir. Now, I am no expert on what prisoners condemned to death ordinarily do on the night before they are doomed to die – but I'm guessing that deeply sound sleep is not the most common occurrence. But there is Peter sleeping like a baby. Peter so at peace with himself and the world that he is just snoring away while the angel tries to get him to wake up! Not fear, in other words. Not fear – but then, what shall we call it when a man doomed to die in the morning can still sleep the deep sleep of the righteous? Not fear – I'd say we should call it faith.

This whole scene of Peter sleeping soundly reminds me of something David once wrote in one of his psalms, Psalm 4. He starts out by telling how he had cried out to the Lord in a time of terrible distress; and then he says this: "*You have given me relief when I was in distress.*"⁵ And soon thereafter, he adds this: "*In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.*"⁶ Look at Peter sleeping there in his cell, chained to the floor, surrounded by guards, awaiting death in the morning – and yet so asleep, so unafraid on the eve of his execution that the angel has to kick him in the side just to get him to wake up. Not fear in the face of his

circumstances, but faith in the God who is always greater than our circumstances – our God, who loves creating a way out of no way, a great escape.

But actually – and let’s be sure we get this point correct – it’s not the size of Peter’s faith that should impress us here or challenge us even. It’s the size of the God in whom he has placed his faith – that’s why Peter is sleeping so soundly, not because his faith is so great, but because the God in whom he has placed his faith is so faithful, so powerful, so to be trusted. In fact, there’s a scene in the Gospels which illumines just this point. Jesus has just finished telling His disciples, including Peter, that they are to forgive seventy times seven when someone wrongs them. And they are blown away by this, rightly perceiving that such a thing, on the basis of their own human capacity for forgiveness, is well-nigh impossible. And so they respond by crying out to Jesus, *“Lord, increase our faith!”*⁷

But Jesus’ response to them is so unexpected. He doesn’t say to them, *“Good answer! You’ve got it – big faith coming right up so you can do all that I command!”* He says to them pretty much the exact opposite. He says to them that bigger faith is not what they need. That the size of their faith is pretty much irrelevant. In fact, that if they have faith only the size of a mustard seed, still they could say to a tree, *“Be uprooted and planted in the sea”* – and it would be so.⁸ In other words, what Jesus is saying to them is that the critical factor is not the size of our faith, but the size of the God in whom we place our faith. The power of the One in whom we trust for our safety and salvation. The might and majesty of the One in whom we place our faith that He shall indeed bring all things round to good – bring us somehow through all our trials, set us free from all our physical, mental, emotional prisons, even deliver us from the absolute-seeming dead-end of the grave.

Faith, not fear – that is Peter, like David before him, having both laid down and sleeping in peace. But the key is not the size of our faith, which is ever small; but the size of the One in whom we place our faith, who is far greater than even our highest expectations: *“You, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.”*⁹ You alone, O Lord. So, when we are in trouble, entrapped, imprisoned, what we do is we just our eyes on Jesus, the One in whom we place our faith. We keep our eyes on Jesus – and so we too will discover that faith is bigger than our fears. Or, rather, that the One in whom we place our faith can calm our fears, and then also overcome all that we fear. Can always be counted on to be with us in our fears, can always be expected and trusted to provide for us a way of escape – into His mercy, love, and power. I came across this recently in a devotional I was reading:

*For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ. He is altogether lovely. Such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace, and all for sinners, even the chief. Live much in the smiles of God. Bask in His beams. Feel His all-seeing eye settled on you in love, and repose in His almighty arms. . . . Let your soul be filled with a heart-ravishing sense of the sweetness and excellency of Christ and all that is in Him.*¹⁰

Faith, not fear – but not so much our faith, as the One in whom we place our faith. That’s what stands out to me as I watch Peter having to be prodded awake by the angel because he has already

laid himself down in peace. *“You have given me relief when I was in distress . . . You, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.”*¹¹

But there is a second thing in this story that really intrigues me – and that is the response of the church when Peter actually knocks on their door. That whole scene, as a matter of fact, seems like it was scripted by Abbott and Costello. The church has gathered together, praying for Peter’s somehow release. And that is certainly the right thing for the church to be doing – to pray, first thing to pray, always to pray. But the members of the church don’t seem to have a whole lot of confidence that their prayers just might be answered – the words of their prayers may be hopeful, but it looks a whole lot like what is really in their hearts and heads is despair. Peter knocks on the door. Rhoda, a serving girl, goes to answer, whispering, *“Who is it?”* And when Peter says, *“It’s me!”* she recognizes his voice and gets so excited – Peter is at the door! – that she completely forgets to let him in. She runs back to the rest of the gathering still bowed in prayer and announces with great joy that Peter himself is standing at the front door right at this very minute. And watch how they respond. *“Our prayers have been answered – glory hallelujah! Praise the Lord!”*? Nope. They respond by telling Rhoda she is out of her mind – Peter is in prison. Where else could he possibly be? But she keeps on insisting that it really is Peter, in the flesh. They respond that if it is Peter at all, then it could only be his ghost and he is already dead. Finally, someone gets up and opens the door, maybe even Rhoda remembering that she had left Peter standing out there in the dark. Finally the door gets opened and, sure enough, Peter in the flesh: *“When they opened, they saw him and were amazed.”*

They had been praying for just this all night, but when it really happened, they couldn’t imagine that it might possibly have happened. As with the struggle between fear and faith in distressing circumstances, I think here we are dealing with the ease of despair triumphing over the seeming impossibility of hope in distressing circumstances. Despite their prayers, the church was, in fact, hopeless about the whole thing – in despair under the assumption that Peter’s death was a sure thing, no way out. Not hope, despite their prayers – only despair. Because all they could see or imagine were the human realities of the situation – Peter in jail with a hundred guards and mighty Herod and his evil intent upon the throne. What they failed to see, failed to imagine, was that there just might be one more factor in this seemingly hopeless situation: God. They were in despair because they had forgotten that our God is an awesome God, a mighty God, a God always capable of making a way out of what looks to human eyes like no way out.

But, much like faith, the hope we possess as Christians is not something we can accomplish on our own, not something we may deduce from our purely human circumstances: *“Well now, considering what we know, I think we’ve got about a fifty-fifty chance here.”* No! The hope we possess has nothing to do with any human assessment of our circumstances, positive or negative. The hope we possess comes from knowing that no human circumstance is ever settled, that nothing is ever over and done with, nothing is ever signed, sealed, and delivered until our God – our great and wonderful God – has had His final word on the subject. Our God, the One who promises to work all things round to good for those who love Him.¹² Our God has the power. Our God is good. Our God is the One who made heaven and earth and everything in them in the first place. And that is why we are established in a hope which will not disappoint us, no matter how bleak the moment may seem – because, as we said about faith, our hope is placed in a God greater than

all our circumstances. I love this quote – just a short quote from one of the greatest Christian theologians of them all, Karl Barth:

If you have heard the Easter message, you can no longer run around with a tragic face and lead the humourless existence of a man who has no hope. One thing still holds, and only this one thing is really serious, that Jesus is the Victor . . . We are invited and summoned to take seriously the victory of God's glory in this man Jesus and to be joyful in Him. Then we may live in thankfulness and not in fear.¹³

And then we may live our lives in hope and not in despair.

Again, our hope is based not on our circumstances, nor even any human strength or craft in meeting our circumstances. Our hope is based upon the God who is Lord over all circumstances – and whose resurrection victory will have the final word over our lives, and everything in them. The final word over the whole of His Creation. And, if we want further proof, just look at how our story ends – a word that should encourage us in the face of every Herod, or Herod sort of circumstance we may encounter:

*Immediately an angel of the Lord struck [Herod] down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.
But the word of God increased and multiplied.*

And so it shall be, until His Kingdom comes.

¹ Matthew 2:1-18.

² Luke 23:1-12.

³ Exodus 11-12.

⁴ Matthew 27:57 – 28:15.

⁵ Psalm 4:1.

⁶ Psalm 4:8.

⁷ Luke 17:1-5.

⁸ Luke 17:6.

⁹ Psalm 4:8.

¹⁰ Michael Reeves, Rejoicing in Christ (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015), p. 11.

¹¹ Psalm 4:1, 8.

¹² Romans 8:28.

¹³ Karl Barth, Dogmatics in Outline (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), p. 123.