

Title: If God is so good, why is there so much evil?
Text: Matthew 14.1-12
Theme: The identity of Jesus
Series: Matthew #78
Prop Stmtnt: Jesus is not the Messiah that people imagined because God is not what you imagine. (He's more and He's better.)

Read Text:

Early this week another report was circulating that researchers had discovered a document that was claiming that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and that they had two children together. I roll my eyes and ignore it and then realize that someone is going to ask me about it so I should at least read the fine print. The document in question is dated 500 years after Christ. Neither Jesus nor Mary Magdalene is mentioned in the document, but a man named Joseph is. While this document is considered to be historically suspect by most researchers and was dismissed years ago, two men are now suggesting that it is possible that Joseph is actually a code word for Jesus. One of the researchers is a man who films documentaries that are so preposterous that no serious historian views this man as credible in any sense of the word. So, instead of ignoring this utter nonsense, tabloid journalism gives a voice to idiocy like this and so, there it was in the headlines.

I do not normally invest much time investigating in order to debunk these types of things because I would basically get nothing else accomplished. And the reason why I mention it this morning is not because I think any of you saw that and had a panic attack thinking that the entire Christian faith was now crumbling. I mention it because there are people who are willing to believe these headlines because they find in this spittle that passes for research an excuse for not believing and submitting to Christ. Granted, they do not want to really investigate Christ and they do not really want to investigate this story. They know what they want to believe. They know what outcome they want. So, when they read a headline that appears to support their desire for unbelief, they latch on to it. Just because it is on the history channel does not mean that it is historical.

The same thing was happening during the life of Christ. There were all sorts of rumors that were circulating about him. We will see this in chapter 16. Some were saying that he was John the Baptist, others were saying that he was Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But, the identity of Jesus is a critical issue and that is why Matthew includes this account about Herod and John the Baptist. Remember that the theme of Matthew's gospel is: Behold your King! But, what kind of a king is he? He is not like any king that you have ever known or imagined. That is the point of this section of Matthew's gospel. We see this in verses one and two.

The Real Issue (1-2)

A. Who is this Jesus?

The issue of the identity of Jesus dominates the next couple of chapters. The failure to recognize who he is and believe in him not only leads to rejection (13.53-58) as we saw last week, but it leads to grievous violence (14.1-12) and will lead to a crucifixion. The violence that is carried out on John is a preview of what will happen to Jesus and is also a foreshadowing of what will happen to many people who identify themselves as followers of Jesus, including many of our brothers and sisters all over the world.

But, there is another pattern that is at work. The death of Christ is not the tragic end of the story. The death of Christ is tragic, but he overcomes death by his resurrection. So, even though there is immediate rejection, persecution and even death, the genuine followers of Christ are guaranteed an eternal life of utter joy. In contrast to that are those who reject Christ and who appear to be in power. For a short time, they appear to be in power. They look like they are the ones catching all of the breaks and even getting away with murder. They don't. So, who is the Jesus? We will see that he is nothing less than the very Son of God. He is God. This means that....

B. He is not like any other King.

It is because of kings like Herod, that we are so jaded when we think of people in authority. What tends to happen when people get into a position of authority? In many cases it appears to ruin them doesn't it? In reality, it does not ruin them. What I mean is that their newfound authority does not cause them to become evil, but their position of authority gives them the freedom and power to carry out the evil that is already in their heart. The reasoning goes like this: "I'm in charge. I get to do whatever I want." But, here is the problem with that. There is no king, president, CEO, manager, board member, police officer, judge, politician, principal, teacher, husband, dad or mom who is actually in charge. Only God is actually in charge. And God has laws that will not be altered by anyone, not matter what your earthly title happens to be.

Ok, so how does that play out in this account? Herod wants to do whatever he wants. He has a title. He is Herod the tetrarch. That means that he has some authority. He is not the Caesar or the governor like Pilate. But, he does have, from Rome, the permission to rule this area, as long as he behaves. As we will see, Herod takes it upon himself to use his position of authority to serve himself. If someone comes along and gets in his way, he kills that person. They are inconvenient. He is committed to his own interest. This is the guy who is living in the palace. This is the guy who gets the royal treatment, the regal introductions, the fancy robes, the finest wines and whatever entertainment he desires. In contrast to that is Jesus. He sleeps in a different place almost every night, spending some of them praying and others in a boat. During the day he is talking with crowds of people. He is touching them and being touched by them. He endures their scoffs and their threats, their questions and their shortsightedness. Then instead of killing them for his convenience, he dies for their pardon. That is the real issue. But it is difficult to keep that in mind because as we will see, this story is grievous.

The Story (3-12)

There are a few accounts in the Bible that are difficult for me to read. This is one of them. I do not like this story. I get angry, almost sick when I read this. Let me give you a bit of the background. First of all, there is Herod.

A. Herod

Now, if you have difficulty keeping all of the Herod's straight in your mind there is a good reason for that. There were a lot of Herods. It all started with Herod, the Great (a humble title that he gave himself). Herod was the king who was reigning in Jerusalem when Jesus was born. He was also the one who rebuilt the Temple and many other things. He not only built things because of his married to five different women (Doris, Mariamne, Mariamne II, Malthace and Cleopatra of Jerusalem). He had children with each of these women. Doris birthed Antipater. Both are banished when Herod decides to marry Mariamne I. Mariamne I birthed Alexander and Aristobulus. Alexander and Aristobulus are sent to Rome to be educated and to hobnob with the big dogs. They return to Israel and are too much of a threat to their father who has them killed. His wife has a brother (Jonathan) whom Herod appoints as High Priest, and then kills him too. Then Herod kills Mariamne I. But, before Aristobulus died, he had a son named Herod, then a son named Aristobulus and then a daughter named Herodias. Herod's third wife is Mariamne II. Mariamne II birthed Herod Philip I. Malthace (4th wife) birthed Archelaus – also known as Herod the Ethnarch (Matt. 2.22). Malthace also birthed Herod Antipas – also known as Herod the Tetrarch. And Cleopatra of Jerusalem (5th wife) birthed Herod Philip II. So, Herod the Great has 7 sons, 4 of whom have the name Herod. When Herod dies, his kingdom is divided up between 3 of the 4 Herods.

Now, my daughter-in-law is from Kentucky and I tease her that in Kentucky, your family tree is a wreath. But, this is a complete trainwreck. Now get this. Herodias is the daughter of Aristobulus (3rd son of Herod the Great who is executed) and the grand-daughter of Herod the Great. She marries her uncle, Herod Philip I and has a daughter named Salome. However, another uncle, Herod Antipas or Herod the Tetrarch has the hots for her and convinces her to divorce her husband and marry him. So, she is divorcing one uncle in order to marry another, both of whom are step-brothers. The problem is, Herod Antipas is already married. His wife is the daughter of the king from Nabatea, whom he married as part of a peace agreement between the two regions. What do you think happened when he divorced her so that he could marry his brother's wife and niece? War! Of course. Rome had to step in and save his bacon on that one. So, Herodias marries another uncle who is also named Herod. This is the Herod and Herodias who are in this story. Her daughter Salome is from her first marriage and by the way, Salome ends up marrying the step-brother of her dad and the step-brother of her step-father, who is also her great uncle, who is, of course named Herod.

B. Herod and Herodias

Obviously when the Nabateans attempt to invade Israel and the Romans have to come and stop it because Herod divorces his wife in order to marry his brother's wife (and niece), the entire country is aware of this. And this marriage does not seem to be "made in heaven" if you know what I mean. Meanwhile...

C. Herod and John the Baptist

John the Baptist was telling Herod that it was wrong for him to divorce his wife and to marry Herodias. Herodias is angered about this. The truth is, she is guilty and so is Herod. Herod, in an effort to please his wife, puts John in prison. But now what? The easiest thing would be to simply kill him and be done with it, but the people think that John is a prophet (which he is). So, Herod is stuck. His wife wants John dead, so Herod personally would like to kill him to please her, but he really seems to be torn between pleasing her and his own conscience and certainly the views of the people.

The fact that John is in prison is not gaining him any political points with his people. And being in prison is not good enough for his wife. One evening, Herod throws a banquet for his birthday. Many of the political and military leaders are in attendance. You can assume that there is a great deal of drinking and frankly, immorality. The morals of Herod's court (or lack thereof) were well known. What really is odd, and normally out of place is for a daughter of royalty (of sorts) to dance before these men in this setting. The women of honor would have their own banquet, while the only women who would be in with the men would be the courtesans. That is why my guess is that Salome was instructed to do this by her mom (Herodias) because she knew how her husband would react. And she was right. Powerful men will do stupid things in situations like this and Herod was no exception. While it was initially shocking for her to do this, the shock gave way to thrill. This is disgusting on so many levels. This girl is performing an exotic dance for her stepfather at the arrangement of her mother. Her step-father, the king, is so pleased by her that in response to her dance, he promises her anything that she wants, up to half the kingdom, which was an expression of magnitude and generosity, not to be taken literally. She conferred with her mom, who was not the least bit displeased with her daughter, but was delighted at the leverage that she now had. Salome had her answer. She wanted the head of John the Baptist on a platter here, now! At this banquet, the head of John the Baptist was to be served as the main course.

Even if he was drunk, Herod knew that he was trapped. He made a promise to this girl and she called him on it. Actually, her mom did. What would he do? He was sorry, the text says. If John was a preview of Jesus, Herod was a preview of Pilate. He made a promise and by the way, Herod did not have an ethical dilemma. This decision was not about him keeping his word, as if that was a noble thing to do. This decision was about saving face, which in this setting was a godless thing to do. Herod gives the word. The executioners go to the prison. John is beheaded and his head is given to Salome, on a platter. Artists have painted scenes of Salome dancing with the head, but the text does not say that. It says that she took the head of John the Baptist to her mom. And by the way

Herodias was not satisfied. I can say this with certainty because Herodias's problem was not ultimately with John but with God. She thought beheading John would relieve her of her guilt, just as the Jews thought crucifying Christ would relieve them. Little did they know that their attempt to destroy him would be the only means by which they could be saved. But as a further preview of what was to come, John's disciples are able to get his body, which they bury and they go and tell Jesus what happened. Prophets are not supposed to die like this. Where was Jesus when John was arrested? Where was Jesus when John was executed? Why didn't Jesus raise John from the dead? There is a tension here isn't there?

3. The Obvious Tension

A. Why did Jesus let John die?

Look at who John was.

John was the cousin of Jesus. John was the forerunner of Jesus. John was the one who paved the way for Jesus, who prophesied about him, who baptized him, who identified with him, who sent him disciples and supported him. Even Jesus said that there was no one person was greater than John.

Look at what John did.

John spoke the truth fearlessly and faithfully. He was not subject to scandal, to bribes, to politics or to pressure. He told the Pharisees what they needed to hear. He told the people what they needed to hear and he told Herod what he needed to hear. We look at people like that and think that we need more of them, not less. There are plenty of bad guys who live too long. Why let someone like this die so early? Seriously, the guy was in his early 30's. He had a lot of mileage left, right? Why would God allow someone this good to be executed?

Look at what happened to him.

The way that John died is nauseating. How can such a manipulating, scheming, wicked, person like Herodias be permitted to be in such a position of influence? John is the good guy and he is killed as the focal point of a birthday party that is disgusting in its evil.

Look at how he died.

He is not only executed, but the animosity against him by Herodias is so deep and so vile that she wants his head publicly presented on a platter. She is so intent on dishonoring his body because she hates him (actually God) that much. This woman is vile.

So, why did Jesus let John die and why did he let John die like this? Is Jesus God? Yes! Is God good? Yes! Is God powerful? Yes! Did Jesus love John? Yes! Could Jesus have stopped this? Yes! So, why didn't Jesus stop this? Hang on to that for a second, there are two related questions.

B. Why does God let people get away with evil?

Is Herodias evil? Yes! Was she responsible for the death of John? Yes! Was she arrested, tried and convicted for her crime? No! Was she struck dead by God on the spot? No? Did she get away with murder? Yes! Why does God let people get away with evil? In fact...

C. Why does God allow evil to exist anyway?

This is the heart of the issue, isn't it? Let me put it into a formula that some have labeled as the "problem of pain." (slide – "problem" of pain)The "problem" of pain, or suffering, or evil is based on the assumption that if God was really good and really powerful that he would just step in stop all of the evil in the world. After all, I love my children. I love people around me. I try to protect them from pain and suffering. If I were God and could actually stop people from doing so much evil, I would do that, and I'm not perfect. Why is it that God, who is supposed to be perfect, doesn't seem to be has bothered about pain and suffering as I am? Wouldn't life be better if every time a child was about to get cancer, God intervened and stopped it? Wouldn't life be better if every time a husband was about to be abusive to his wife that God stepped in and stopped it? Wouldn't life be better if every time someone wanted to rape someone, rob someone, invade another country, lie, cheat, steal, commit adultery, get high, get drunk, drive drunk, or get sick or hungry, or lose a job that God intervened and stopped it? There are two fatal flaws with that thinking: 1) We do not possess a pure moral standard by which we are ever in a position to be the judge of God. We have a sense of morality because we are made in the image of God, but our moral compass does not point due north. Therefore, it is fine to ask these questions and to work through these issues, but we must do so with humility because our sense of morality is not perfect. 2) If God intervened and stopped all evil, would life really be better? Sure, we would have peace on earth, but what kind of a peace would it be? It would be a tyrannical peace. It would be a forced peace. It would be a threatening peace with the punishment of death for anyone who dares to disturb it. Have you ever been in a family like that? Have you ever been in a church like that? Can you imagine a world like that? No one is happy because no one loves or trusts.

A few years ago a movie called *The Truman Show* came out. It was about Truman, who unbeknownst to him was the subject of a TV show. What he thought was his hometown, friends, colleagues at work and even his wife, were in fact a stage and actors for this enormously popular television show. The producer was a guy named Christof who controlled everything and protected Truman from having anything go wrong in his life.

Truman discovers that his life is “not real.” And he tries to escape. He longs for a world of pain, sorrow, risk and danger, because that is a world where love and trust can exist.

So, it is easy to react and say, I wish that God would stop all the evil in the world. I wish he would deal with all the bad people. (Not me of course, but everyone who is mean to me.) But this earth is not a doll-house where God is playing. God, without diminishing any of his sovereignty created people as real, independent, relational, decision-making beings with the capacity to choose evil. God gave us the option to be irrational. God gave us the option to reject him and to murder his prophets and to reject his law, like Adam did in the Garden of Eden. So, yes, God could have created a world without any possibility of pain and sorrow and in so doing he would have made us as machines. But God made us as real, personal and relational beings with the capacity to love which means we have the capacity to hate and the capacity to trust, to sacrifice, to enjoy, which means we have the capacity to betray, to reject and to scorn. So, why does God allow evil to exist? Because God did not make us as robots. But, in the end, evil does not win and nor will it last. So,

D. What kind of a King is this?

Jesus is a powerful king, whose power was repeatedly displayed in his miracles and ultimately in his resurrection. Jesus is a good king, whose goodness and righteousness was repeatedly displayed in his love of purity and his aversion to all evil. But Jesus is a patient king. His plan was not to judge the world in his first coming, but to provide the only means by which we could be rescued from his judgment. Our means of rescue comes through the death of Christ on the cross. Instead of a king who kills others who are perceived as a threat to his position, he dies that we might live with him and that he might reign with him. (Slide – The Reason for Pain)

Therefore, God has not only ordained suffering as a means to accomplish his plan, but it means that God has something infinitely better in store for John than a longer life. In Matt 14, that truth is cloudy and hazy. In Matt 28 and Rev 21 - 22 that truth is amazingly clear. What John experienced in part through an unjust death, Jesus experienced in full. God, through the pain of injustice accomplished our salvation that will overrule all injustice and secure a world to come that will be without pain and suffering, and will be perfectly relational, loving, trusting, joyful and all-together satisfying.

4. Suff to Chew on:

- A. Jesus is not like any other King because God is not like any other god.**
- B. Can you trust God even though he allows evil to exist (for now) and even fulfill his purpose?**

Are you willing to believe that he is what he claims to be? He is powerful and loving and that he is good and he will keep his promises. Are you willing to affirm that?

C. If you do not trust God, then you have to trust yourself or trust in man.

If your trust is in man, then you are at the mercy of forces that you cannot control. When those forces are other people, then we call that the fear of man. We fear man because we think that they are the key to our happiness. How does the fear of man influence Herodias? Herod? Salome? How does the fear of God influence John the Baptist? So, in the end, who is actually in bondage? Herod, Herodias, and Salome. And who is actually free? John the Baptist

D. God expects you to grieve over injustice in our world. (Grieve in faith and in anticipation of joy)