

Meet Jesus... Again: 2. Greater Than
Mark 4:35-41
March 17, 2019
Pastor Steve Richards

My mother taught me how to do laundry. At first, I just watched as she did mine. She showed me how to sort the colors into piles and how to use the machine, and when something needed ironing, she showed me how to do that too. She was teaching me how so I could do it myself, and when the laundry was piling up, I said, "Mom, I need clean clothes." And she said, "Ok, go wash them." And suddenly I realized I didn't need clean clothes after all. The dirty ones didn't smell so bad. I could still wear them. "Mom, I don't have a clean shirt for tomorrow" hoping that would cause her to spring into action, but she said, "You know where the washing machine is located. You know how to use it." I didn't want to do it. I wanted her to do it. You're the mom. You're supposed to take care of your children's needs. No, I'm your mother, and I'm supposed to teach you how to do your laundry because you won't always have me with you. There in the boat. The disciples were in learning mode – they didn't know it. Jesus had the power, but that power had a purpose.

This is our second week in the gospel of Mark. We are meeting Jesus and discovering what his life means for us today. There was a great urgency as Mark wrote this book. The Roman Empire had done the unimaginable by killing the Christian leaders in Rome, among them the apostles Peter and Paul, and then Rome slaughtered more than 1 million Jews and Jewish Christians in and around Galilee and Jerusalem. This power, the power of the Roman Empire, was also what the people feared at the time Jesus came into the world. The people were expecting a Messiah who would gather an army and overthrow the Roman Empire. God heard their cry and sent Jesus. He came with power, but not the power they expected. Jesus had the power, but that power had a purpose.

We will put the verses on the screen, but if you have a Bible with you this morning, you might use that to follow as we look at several passages found in chapters 1-4 of the Gospel of Mark. After his baptism in the Jordan River and his 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus heads to Capernaum (the village of Naum), on the north side of the Sea of Galilee, and along the way he begins inviting disciples to follow him.

Mark 1:21-22 Jesus and his followers went into Capernaum. Immediately on the Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and started teaching. The people were amazed by his teaching, for he was teaching them with authority, not like the legal experts. The legal experts were already the established religious authorities. They knew and taught the commandments and laws of scripture. But now Jesus arrives and begins teach with authority that the legal experts didn't seem to have. Jesus spoke with power. Over and over again, we will see that Jesus spoke with this commanding presence which is what we would expect from the Son of God – that he would communicate a power that no other teacher could. **Suddenly, there in the synagogue, a person with an evil spirit** In the first century, a person with an evil spirit was probably a person that today we would call mentally ill. **screamed, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are. You are the holy one from God."** **"Silence!" Jesus said, speaking harshly to the demon. "Come out of him!"** The unclean spirit shook him and screamed, then it came out. This is a small town. Everyone knows this troubled man. He's in the synagogue with them. Jesus speaks a word, and he's set free. **Everyone was shaken and questioned among themselves, "What's this? A new teaching with authority! He even commands unclean spirits and they obey him!"**

Mark wants us to see that Jesus has power over the darkest forces. We already saw how Jesus was more powerful than the devil in the wilderness. And now, the first thing that happens in Capernaum, he wrestles with an evil spirit. The forces of darkness know who Jesus is even before other people know this. The evil spirit calls him “the holy one from God.” But the forces of darkness have no power in the presence of Jesus. It’s like a light. You turn on the light and the darkness disappears. Christ has more power than anything we might face. There have been times when I have felt afraid – physically afraid in the dark or something awakens me in the night or has kept me from being able to sleep – and sometimes it has not been enough for me to think that Jesus was with me, but I’ve said aloud: “I belong to Jesus, and he’s more powerful than you are.” Jesus has the power to set us free.

Mark 3 Jesus returned to the synagogue. A man with a withered hand was there. Wanting to bring charges against Jesus, they (the Pharisees) were watching Jesus closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. He said to the man with the withered hand, “Step up where people can see you.” Could you imagine that here? Then he said to them, “Is it legal on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they said nothing.

[slide] **Looking around at them with anger** Why is Jesus angry? Because the Pharisees have put rules in front of people. For Jesus, people always came first. But for many of the religious leaders, rules came first. To be fair, they found religious practices to be life-giving and that’s what made them holy before God. But Jesus calls to the man who had been unable to use his hand and says, today is the moment you will be set free. And the Pharisees say, “Not today! Jesus, you are breaking the religious rule about Sabbath, and there’s a reason we have these rules. You can help the man any day but the Sabbath. He’s had this withered hand for a long time. This is not an emergency. What’s the urgency today?” They were looking for a reason to diminish what Jesus was doing. **Looking around at them with anger, deeply grieved at their unyielding hearts,** We see Jesus do this at another time when he sees what the Pharisees were about to do to a woman caught in an act of adultery and he stops to write in the dirt. He’s angry. He’s frustrated. The focus of his anger is usually the most religious. To other people, Jesus offers grace, but to the religious, he gets angry, because they are judging other people and putting rules in front of people. **he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” So he did, and his hand was made healthy. At that, the Pharisees got together with the supporters of Herod to plan how to destroy Jesus.** The desire to kill Jesus starts here – in the synagogue, almost at the beginning of his ministry. And I think there is a leadership lesson here. If you are striving to do the right thing, to follow Jesus, some people won’t like that. If you don’t want to be criticized, don’t be a leader. If you teach Sunday School or a Bible study or lead a faith group, somebody is going to think your lesson is boring or won’t like the lesson that is being taught. Or if you are a school teacher – I’ve heard teachers say that some of the hardest things they face are parents who complain about their teaching. And it hurts – to the point that they feel like quitting. But the longer you stay at this, you realize criticism comes with the job – and so you try to listen so you can learn if there something you need to learn, but you don’t allow yourself to be destroyed by it. Jesus faces criticism but he doesn’t quit. He continues to do what he believes God wants him to do.

There have been times throughout my ministry when things were not going well, and I listened to voices of critics and thought it’s time to go, and I began to pursue options outside of ministry. I even had other approach me with opportunities. I remember a time in my 30s saying to Amanda, I can’t see myself doing this anymore. It is just too painful. And I had to take some time away and what I realized was that God was not calling me away. I was trying to escape. And I look back now and realize that if I had left ministry then, I would have missed out on being here. My most amazing experiences have happened after that time. What I learn from Jesus is perseverance. Don’t give up. Listen to the criticism and try to learn from it, but don’t be

destroyed by it. And if you are in a place in your life where you feel like giving up, don't give up. Jesus did not give up.

And this brings us to the verses from chapter 4 that were read earlier. Jesus spent much of his ministry along the Sea of Galilee and he was often in a boat. There is something calming and life-giving about being by the water – which is why many of you have lake homes or enjoy going to the lake or the ocean. One evening, Jesus said to his disciples, “let's get in the boat and go to the other side of the lake.” And as they move away from shore what I picture is calm water and a beautiful canopy of stars overhead and Jesus who is seated at the back of the boat falls asleep. But by the time they reach the middle of the lake, the weather conditions have changed dramatically. **Gale-force winds arose, and waves crashed against the boat so that the boat was swamped.** And now the disciples are struggling. They are rowing with all their might but not getting anywhere. I picture this painting by Rembrandt. This is all-hands-on-deck. We may not survive this! It's dark, gale-force winds, they can't tell where they are. At that time, no one knew how deep the lake was, because no one had been able to reach the bottom. What they thought was that at the very bottom there was a doorway to the abyss. You didn't want to be overboard, especially at night because that's when the demons came up from the abyss.

Here's the point: This storm is a metaphor. There will be times in life when we find ourselves in the middle of a storm, when we are so terrified we can't stand it. Or what's coming at us is terrifying. I've heard this from many of you when you were told you had cancer. I'll never forget that moment when we were told Amanda had cancer. I remember being so terrified, and I looked at Amanda and I could see the terror in her eyes, and I could not even speak. We didn't know how we got to that place or what it meant or if there was a future. For you, it might not be cancer but it was the death of someone you loved or the sudden end of a relationship and in that moment you had zero power. **But Jesus was in the rear of the boat, sleeping on a pillow. They woke him up and said, “Teacher, don't you care that we're drowning?” He got up and gave orders to the wind, and he said to the lake, “Silence! Be still!” The wind settled down and there was a great calm. Jesus asked them, “Why are you frightened? Don't you have faith yet?”** When I am in the midst of the storm, what has made all the difference for me is knowing Jesus is in the boat. No matter what happens I don't have to be afraid, Jesus is there. And even if the worst thing happens, somehow Jesus still has hold of me. **Overcome with awe, they said to each other, “Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him!”** When Jesus calmed the wind and the waves, the disciples were overcome with awe, because they didn't know who Jesus is.

Later in chapter 6, the disciples will find themselves in the middle of the lake in the midst of another storm and this time Jesus is not in the boat with them, but seeing their distress, Jesus walks out to them on the water and got in the boat with them. And immediately, there was calm. 140 times in scripture, we read, don't be afraid, God is with you. The Psalmist says, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” Why? You, Lord, are with me. Jesus is in the boat. Why are you frightened? Don't you have faith yet? Jesus brings power with a purpose – to show what faith can do.

Here's my challenge: remember no matter what storms you are facing or will face, Jesus is with you in the boat. And if you are not sure about that, maybe it's time to invite Jesus into your boat. He's not going to force himself on you. He was in the boat with the disciples but they still had to call on him. So we invite Jesus into the boat and trust no matter how bad the storm, he can give us peace.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of March 17, 2019

Weekly Prayer: When the storms of life rage all around us, dear Lord, may your great Spirit steady us. Calm our anxious hearts and guide us by your unchanging love. Allow the Word that we hear in scripture to draw us ever closer to you and to send us into the world with confidence and hope. We want to know you more. Thank you for the ways you will come to us today. Amen.

Monday, March 18

Scripture: Mark 4:1-20

Parable: a farmer scattering seed

Jesus began to teach beside the lake again. Such a large crowd gathered that he climbed into a boat there on the lake. He sat in the boat while the whole crowd was nearby on the shore. He said many things to them in parables. While teaching them, he said, "Listen to this! A farmer went out to scatter seed. As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path; and the birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn't deep. When the sun came up, it scorched the plants; and they dried up because they had no roots. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked the seeds, and they produced nothing. Other seed fell into good soil and bore fruit. Upon growing and increasing, the seed produced in one case a yield of thirty to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of one hundred to one." He said, "Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention!"

When they were alone, the people around Jesus, along with the Twelve, asked him about the parables. He said to them, "The secret of God's kingdom has been given to you, but to those who are outside everything comes in parables. This is so that they can look and see but have no insight, and they can hear but not understand. Otherwise, they might turn their lives around and be forgiven. "Don't you understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The farmer scatters the word. This is the meaning of the seed that fell on the path: When the word is scattered and people hear it, right away Satan comes and steals the word that was planted in them. Here's the meaning of the seed that fell on rocky ground: When people hear the word, they immediately receive it joyfully. Because they have no roots, they last for only a little while. When they experience distress or abuse because of the word, they immediately fall away. Others are like the seed scattered among the thorny plants. These are the ones who have heard the word; but the worries of this life, the false appeal of wealth, and the desire for more things break in and choke the word, and it bears no fruit. The seed scattered on good soil are those who hear the word and embrace it. They bear fruit, in one case a yield of thirty to one, in another case sixty to one, and in another case one hundred to one."

Observation: Jesus often used stories about common objects or events to teach uncommon truths. Likely a farmer was hand-casting seed on a nearby hillside, in plain sight, as Jesus told this story. Verses 10-12 did not mean that Jesus intended parables to hide his message. He quoted Isaiah 6:9-10, which ironically described what was happening, not what God wanted. Hearers with closed minds, in Isaiah's or Jesus' day, wouldn't hear no matter how much they listened.

Application: Jesus ended his parable with a common Hebrew expression: "Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention!" It was not mainly about eardrums. In the Bible the ear is synonymous with the heart and mind as an organ of cognition (Proverbs 2:2; Isaiah 6:9-10), and true hearing involves listening and understanding (Job 34:16). What has helped you tune

your inner, spiritual “ears” to God’s voice? What helps you persist in seeking to understand God’s teachings, rather than just giving up?

Prayer: Lord God, you want me to know you. You reveal yourself in many ways, some of them subtle and quiet. Give me ears to listen, a spirit attentive to all you wish to convey to me. Amen.

Tuesday, March 19

Scripture: Mark 4:21-34

More parables: lamps, mustard seed

Jesus said to them, "Does anyone bring in a lamp in order to put it under a basket or a bed? Shouldn't it be placed on a lampstand? Everything hidden will be revealed, and everything secret will come out into the open. Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention!" He said to them, "Listen carefully! God will evaluate you with the same standard you use to evaluate others. Indeed, you will receive even more. Those who have will receive more, but as for those who don't have, even what they don't have will be taken away from them."

Then Jesus said, "This is what God's kingdom is like. It's as though someone scatters seed on the ground, then sleeps and wakes night and day. The seed sprouts and grows, but the farmer doesn't know how. The earth produces crops all by itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full head of grain. Whenever the crop is ready, the farmer goes out to cut the grain because it's harvest time." He continued, "What's a good image for God's kingdom? What parable can I use to explain it? Consider a mustard seed. When scattered on the ground, it's the smallest of all the seeds on the earth; but when it's planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all vegetable plants. It produces such large branches that the birds in the sky are able to nest in its shade." With many such parables he continued to give them the word, as much as they were able to hear. He spoke to them only in parables, then explained everything to his disciples when he was alone with them.

Observation: Light dispels darkness. It may reveal all the beauty of God’s world, or help lost individuals find their way. Rabbis in Jesus’ day often referred to the mustard seed as one of the smallest objects. Jesus’ picture of the plant may have been a bit inflated—most mustard plants generally grew from 2-6 feet tall. There was a reason for that. The language evokes the image of a great kingdom of old that would be supplanted by God’s kingdom (Daniel 4:12). The glorious future kingdom was already active in a hidden way in Jesus’ ministry.

Application: Jesus’ mustard seed story pointed his followers toward patience and long-term confidence. Like the tiny mustard seed, his kingdom would grow—but not all at once. When do you need to exercise patience? What helps you maintain confidence that, in the end, God will fully establish God’s kingdom to end evil and rule the earth?

Faith Group Discussion: Have you ever flown over a city at night? Or come out of a long, dark tunnel into bright sunlight? As John would later write about Jesus, darkness can never extinguish light (John 1:5). What dark corners of your neighborhood, your city and your world need to experience the light of God? What can you do to help God’s light shine into these dark corners?

Prayer: God, as I go about my life today, keep me ever mindful of the people who need to find your light in their world. Fill my heart with love for you so overflowing that I cannot keep it hidden. Amen.

Wednesday, March 20

Scripture: Mark 4:35-5:20

Calming outer and inner storms

Later that day, when evening came, Jesus said to them, "Let's cross over to the other side of the lake." They left the crowd and took him in the boat just as he was. Other boats followed along. Gale-force winds arose, and waves crashed against the boat so that the boat was swamped. But Jesus was in the rear of the boat, sleeping on a pillow. They woke him up and said, "Teacher, don't you care that we're drowning?" He got up and gave orders to the wind, and he said to the lake, "Silence! Be still!" The wind settled down and there was a great calm. Jesus asked them, "Why are you frightened? Don't you have faith yet?" Overcome with awe, they said to each other, "Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him!"

Jesus and his disciples came to the other side of the lake, to the region of the Gerasenes. As soon as Jesus got out of the boat, a man possessed by an evil spirit came out of the tombs. This man lived among the tombs, and no one was ever strong enough to restrain him, even with a chain. He had been secured many times with leg irons and chains, but he broke the chains and smashed the leg irons. No one was tough enough to control him. Night and day in the tombs and the hills, he would howl and cut himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from far away, he ran and knelt before him, shouting, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" He said this because Jesus had already commanded him, "Unclean spirit, come out of the man!" Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He responded, "Legion is my name, because we are many." They pleaded with Jesus not to send them out of that region. A large herd of pigs was feeding on the hillside. "Send us into the pigs!" they begged. "Let us go into the pigs!" Jesus gave them permission, so the unclean spirits left the man and went into the pigs. Then the herd of about two thousand pigs rushed down the cliff into the lake and drowned. Those who tended the pigs ran away and told the story in the city and in the countryside. People came to see what had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the man who used to be demon-possessed. They saw the very man who had been filled with many demons sitting there fully dressed and completely sane, and they were filled with awe. Those who had actually seen what had happened to the demon-possessed man told the others about the pigs. Then they pleaded with Jesus to leave their region. While he was climbing into the boat, the one who had been demon-possessed pleaded with Jesus to let him come along as one of his disciples. But Jesus wouldn't allow it. "Go home to your own people," Jesus said, "and tell them what the Lord has done for you and how he has shown you mercy." The man went away and began to proclaim in the Ten Cities all that Jesus had done for him, and everyone was amazed.

Observation: Jesus' followers (who'd fished Galilee for a living) had a healthy respect for the strong storms that could suddenly appear on that landlocked lake. Only God, Hebrews believed, could restrain the sea's stormy chaos (Jeremiah 5:22). To see Jesus exercise that divine power before their eyes awed them. Mark then portrayed a man on "the other side" of the Sea—Gentile territory. And the man lived like a beast: terrifyingly strong, unstable, isolated "among the tombs," where "he would howl and cut himself with stones."

Application: Think of one big personal life "storm" you've had to live through. How did you make your way in that stormy season of life? Did you have any sense Jesus was "in the boat" with you? In the song, *Sometimes He Calms the Storm*, we find these lines: "*Sometimes He calms the storm; And other times He calms His child.*" In which of those ways has Jesus most supported you in life's storms? How has that impacted your relationship with God, and shaped the person you are today?

Faith Group Discussion: In his book, *Why Do Christians Shoot Their Wounded?* Christian psychologist Dwight Carlson noted that some Christians tragically use a story like Mark 5 to argue that all cases of severe mental/emotional illness spring from spiritual failings. But Jesus did not condemn the man for his condition; he simply set things right. How can the church become a safer place for people facing mental and emotional struggles?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when you met a man from whom everyone else wanted to run away, you cared and you healed. Thank you for being willing to care about and heal the parts of me that frighten even me, too. Amen.

Thursday, March 21

Scripture: Mark 5:21-34

Healed by a furtive, faith-filled touch

Jesus crossed the lake again, and on the other side a large crowd gathered around him on the shore. Jairus, one of the synagogue leaders, came forward. When he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded with him, "My daughter is about to die. Please, come and place your hands on her so that she can be healed and live." So Jesus went with him. A swarm of people were following Jesus, crowding in on him. A woman was there who had been bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a lot under the care of many doctors, and had spent everything she had without getting any better. In fact, she had gotten worse. Because she had heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his clothes. She was thinking, If I can just touch his clothes, I'll be healed. Her bleeding stopped immediately, and she sensed in her body that her illness had been healed. At that very moment, Jesus recognized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples said to him, "Don't you see the crowd pressing against you? Yet you ask, 'Who touched me?'" But Jesus looked around carefully to see who had done it. The woman, full of fear and trembling, came forward. Knowing what had happened to her, she fell down in front of Jesus and told him the whole truth. He responded, "Daughter, your faith has healed you; go in peace, healed from your disease."

Observation: A desperate woman had heard about Jesus. He moved away, followed by a crowd, to help a synagogue leader named Jairus' sick daughter. (We'll look at that case tomorrow.) The woman's problem would be serious today, but it was worse then. Jewish law saw her condition as permanently "unclean," like a leper (see Leviticus 15:25-27). She couldn't legally touch anyone; hence her stealthy touch of Jesus' garment. But "Jesus recognized that power had gone out from him."

Application: What a burden of shame this woman must have carried, along with her physical issues. Many people saw ailments like hers as judgments from God (see John 9:2). How do you see yourself? Are there things in your life you'd rather keep hidden? Was Jesus being unkind when he called the healed woman forward—or was he freeing her from shame as well as from her physical disorder?

Faith Group Discussion: In his commentary, William Barclay noted that the Jewish Talmud offered cures for this woman's condition like "carrying the ashes of an ostrich-egg in a linen rag in summer and a cotton rag in winter; or carrying a barley corn found in the dung of a white she-ass." Have you tried to deal with shame, guilt or other pain on your own, using various self-help "folk remedies"? How can Jesus' love redirect your efforts along more effective paths?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for letting your power flow for the fearful, forlorn woman in this story. Even when I'm afraid or ashamed, I ask you to continue healing me. Amen.

Friday, March 22

Scripture: Mark 5:35-6:6

A trusting synagogue leader, a "repulsed" hometown

While Jesus was still speaking with her, messengers came from the synagogue leader's house, saying to Jairus, "Your daughter has died. Why bother the teacher any longer?" But Jesus overheard their report and said to the synagogue leader, "Don't be afraid; just keep trusting." He didn't allow anyone to follow him except Peter, James, and John, James' brother. They came to the synagogue leader's house, and he saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "What's all this commotion and crying about? The child isn't dead. She's only sleeping." They laughed at him, but he threw them all out. Then, taking the child's parents and his disciples with him, he went to the room where the child was. Taking her hand, he said to her, "Talitha kum," which means, "Young woman, get up." Suddenly the young woman got up and began to walk around. She was 12 years old. They were shocked! He gave them strict orders that no one should know what had happened. Then he told them to give her something to eat.

Jesus left that place and came to his hometown. His disciples followed him. On the Sabbath, he began to teach in the synagogue. Many who heard him were surprised. "Where did this man get all this? What's this wisdom he's been given? What about the powerful acts accomplished through him? Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't he Mary's son and the brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" They were repulsed by him and fell into sin. Jesus said to them, "Prophets are honored everywhere except in their own hometowns, among their relatives, and in their own households." He was unable to do any miracles there, except that he placed his hands on a few sick people and healed them. He was appalled by their disbelief. Then Jesus traveled through the surrounding villages teaching.

Observation: Mark had already documented that Jesus' ministry met hostility from the religious authorities (see Mark 2:6, 24; 3:6, 22). With his daughter deathly ill, Jairus ("one of the synagogue leaders") laid aside any objections he might have had to Jesus. When messengers came saying the girl had died, Jesus encouraged Jairus, saying, "Don't be afraid; just keep trusting." He repaid the synagogue leader's trust by giving him back his daughter. Then he went to Nazareth, his home town, where familiarity apparently bred contempt and disbelief.

Application: When Jesus said the girl was "only sleeping" (Mark 5:39), he did not mean she hadn't died. People then as now could tell death from unconsciousness. They didn't ask for professional mourners if a person was still breathing. But with Jesus there, the girl's time in death would be no longer than a sleep (see also John 11:11-14). How is Jesus' power over even death a source of hope and confidence for you as you face life with all its uncertainties?

Faith Group Discussion: In Nazareth, Jesus met rejection and anger. (Luke 4:16-21 tells us that Jesus defined his mission by claiming God was fulfilling the words of Isaiah 61:1-2 through him.) In what ways did "Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't he Mary's son and the brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon?" express doubt about Jesus' messianic claim? Why would Jesus' work to address physical and spiritual bondage, poverty and blindness "repulse" his home town?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you were (and are) so much more than just “the carpenter.” Help me to find and value time with you. Nourish my spirit, and fill me with your resilience. Amen.

Saturday, March 23

Scripture: Mark 6:7-29

Immoral power alarmed by moral strength

He called for the Twelve and sent them out in pairs. He gave them authority over unclean spirits. He instructed them to take nothing for the journey except a walking stick—no bread, no bags, and no money in their belts. He told them to wear sandals but not to put on two shirts. He said, “Whatever house you enter, remain there until you leave that place. If a place doesn’t welcome you or listen to you, as you leave, shake the dust off your feet as a witness against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that people should change their hearts and lives. They cast out many demons, and they anointed many sick people with olive oil and healed them. Herod the king heard about these things, because the name of Jesus had become well-known. Some were saying, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and this is why miraculous powers are at work through him.” Others were saying, “He is Elijah.” Still others were saying, “He is a prophet like one of the ancient prophets.” But when Herod heard these rumors, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised to life.” He said this because Herod himself had arranged to have John arrested and put in prison because of Herodias, the wife of Herod’s brother Philip. Herod had married her, but John told Herod, “It’s against the law for you to marry your brother’s wife!” So Herodias had it in for John. She wanted to kill him, but she couldn’t. This was because Herod respected John. He regarded him as a righteous and holy person, so he protected him. John’s words greatly confused Herod, yet he enjoyed listening to him. Finally, the time was right. It was on one of Herod’s birthdays, when he had prepared a feast for his high-ranking officials and military officers and Galilee’s leading residents. Herod’s daughter Herodias came in and danced, thrilling Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the young woman, “Ask me whatever you wish, and I will give it to you.” Then he swore to her, “Whatever you ask I will give to you, even as much as half of my kingdom.” She left the banquet hall and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” “John the Baptist’s head,” Herodias replied. Hurrying back to the ruler, she made her request: “I want you to give me John the Baptist’s head on a plate, right this minute.” Although the king was upset, because of his solemn pledge and his guests, he didn’t want to refuse her. So he ordered a guard to bring John’s head. The guard went to the prison, cut off John’s head, brought his head on a plate, and gave it to the young woman, and she gave it to her mother. When John’s disciples heard what had happened, they came and took his dead body and laid it in a tomb.

Observation: Herod Antipas divorced his wife to marry Herodias. She had previously married his half-brother Herod Phillip. John the Baptist denounced that example of royal decadence, and Herodias hated him for it. Herodias sent a young woman, probably her daughter by Phillip, to dance at Antipas’ birthday party. Dazzled, Herod publicly promised the girl anything she asked. And Herodias told the girl to demand an end to the life of the fearless preacher Jesus called “more than a prophet” (Matthew 11:7-9).

Application: Few Bible stories show more vividly why it matters that our faith take the long view. To human eyes, Herodias won. John’s abrupt, unjust execution seemed to silence his voice. But which of them has had a better impact on the world in the centuries since Herod’s feast? Which of them could be more confident of eternal life with God?

Faith Group Discussion: Neither Mark nor Matthew gave the name of the young woman who danced before Herod. The Jewish historian Josephus named her as “Salome.” In his

commentary, William Barclay wrote that Herod “kept his promise to Salome because he had made it in front of his cronies and was unwilling to break it. He feared their jeers...he feared that they would think him weak.” How do you define true strength for yourself? Has trying to look “strong” to others ever made you weaker?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, even though Antipas arbitrarily arrested and unjustly killed John, you sent your followers out to proclaim your kingdom. It’s much safer for me to share the good news—but sometimes I’m still afraid. Give me more of your courage—and John’s. Amen.