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“Pressure”

2 Samuel 6:1-5 17b-19 Mark 6:14-29 Ephesians 1:3-14

INTRODUCTION TO 2 SAMUEL 6:1-5 17b-19

King David was so excited that the Ark of the Covenant was coming back to Jerusalem that he danced in the streets. He danced with reckless abandon. His wife Michael saw him from the window and complained bitterly about his behavior that she felt was beneath him as the king. He was a ruler who didn't care what people thought about him. Hear the word of the Lord from 2 Samuel 6:1-5; 12b-19.

INTRODUCTION TO MARK 6:14-29

Last week we saw Jesus sending his disciples out on their first missionary journey. They came back rejoicing at the miracles that took place. The news of their success reached King Herod's palace. Their good news became bad news that haunted Herod. David the king danced to give glory to God. Salome danced to get revenge. Herod cared what people thought about him. Hear the word of God, the gospel of our Lord from Mark 6:14-29

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Let us pray. Dear Lord, though the cause of evil seems to prosper, let us never lose faith that the cause of righteousness and justice will ultimately triumph. Give us the peace of your presence amidst a world of pressure. Lord, thank you for this, your word. Open our eyes to see, our minds to understand, our hearts to receive and our lives to respond to your word through the power of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

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Have you ever noticed the label on an aerosol can that says, “Contents Under Pressure?” I've always thought that would be a good name for a band.

Last week I talked about Rodney Dangerfield's trademark complaint that he didn't get any respect. Well, I heard about a boss who had a similar complaint. It seems this particular boss was feeling the pressure and was complaining in a staff meeting that he wasn't getting any respect. Later that morning he went to a local sign shop and bought a small sign that read: "I'm the Boss!" Then he taped it to his office door.

Later that day when he returned from lunch, he found that someone had taped a note to the sign that said: "Your wife called, she wants her sign back!"

Pressure takes its toll. As I speak the little country that could, Croatia is taking on France in the World Cup Finals in Russia. Now THERE is pressure. Croatia will be under pressure to win. France will be under pressure to not lose to a country the size of New Jersey.

Serena Williams faced pressure yesterday as took on Angelique Kerber looking to win her 28th Grand Slam. She lost in straight sets. (Having won 27 Grand Slams was fantastic, but this was not to be after taking a year off to have a beautiful baby girl.)

The 90 divers that were racing against time to rescue the Wild Boars football team in those flooding caves in Thailand were under pressure to get them out before the monsoons flooded the caves even more. Tragically one diver lost his life taking air tanks to the children but ran out of air for himself.

Pressure takes its toll not only in stadiums with thousands watching or in flooding caves with cameras trained. Pressure takes its toll in the office. Pressure takes its toll IN office.

This morning's gospel lesson has us take a look at a ruler whose wife put the pressure on her husband to do something he didn't really want to do. Even though Herod was one whose word was law, he was under a great deal of pressure. When you're number 1 you have to always keep an eye out for those who want to be Number 1 next!!!

Herod was the name of the dynasty under Rome that ruled Jewish Palestine from 37 B.C. until 70 A.D. There were 107 years of Herods who ruled Palestine. Of those Herods, there were only two who are mentioned in Scripture. The first was Herod the Great. When the magi did not return to Herod after they left him to search for the Christ child, Herod ordered his soldiers to go to Bethlehem and kill every boy child 2 years old and younger. Herod the Great ordered what came to be called "the Slaughter of the Innocents." This Herod ordered the "Slaughter of the Innocent"—John the Baptist.

As has too often been the case in history, the powers that be are content to regard religion as a kind of hobby that seems to satisfy certain needs people have. And so long as it stays in the realm of "hobby," religion and the people who practice it are left alone. But when the religious start to stray out of that designated realm, that's when things get ugly fast. **1**

Herodias wanted John killed, but without Herod's approval she was powerless to do so. Herod respected John, knowing that he was a good and holy man, and so he kept him under his protection. Herod was disturbed whenever he talked with John, but even so he liked to listen to him. Herod could have listened to John for a long time, but then, he had a birthday.

What is it about birthdays? What has a person done to deserve special recognition for being born? Congratulations you did absolutely nothing and you're here! You deserve a party! Actually I think on our birthdays the mothers should be given a party....they did all the work! My hats off to Anne this week because tomorrow is our son Andrew's 35<sup>th</sup> birthday!

Herod gave his own party for his friends, officers and the Kiwanians from Galilee. As part of the festivities Herodias' daughter Salome, Herod's stepdaughter, came in and danced for them. Either she was sensational, or the patrons and Herod himself were way too far into their cups when she took to the dance floor.

When Salome finished dancing, Herod did something a person in power should never do. He made a promise. We all know how campaign promises can come back to bite. Salome asked for John's head on a platter.

Herod was sorry he had made this vow, but not sorry enough to not go through with it. He was too embarrassed to go back on his word in front of his guests. Herod ordered the death of an innocent man--a man whom he admired--to avoid being embarrassed in front of his friends. John lost his life but gained the kingdom. In Herod's effort to save face he lost his soul.

Soren Kierkegaard said, "The tyrant dies and his rule ends, the martyr dies and his rule begins."

When we attempt to live a life worthy of the Gospel it is because our understanding of "worth" is far different from the world's understanding. John lost his life because of his commitment to truth as he understood it, much like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his struggles with Nazism and Hitler. Bonhoeffer was a pastor in the German Lutheran Church who was forced to choose between his loyalty to God or to an insane ruler. He said, "If I sit next to a madman as he drives a car into a group of innocent bystanders, I can't, as a Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe, then comfort the wounded and bury the dead. I must try to wrestle the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver." When it appeared inevitable that the Nazis were going to lose to the allies, Hitler ordered that he be shot out just out of spite. Bonhoeffer was executed for the opposition he voiced to his Herod --Herr Hitler.

As G.K. Chesterton so concisely wrote: "It is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting, but tried and found difficult." 2

Pressure is not limited to the palaces of rulers, to the pitch of World Cup Soccer, the Courts at Wimbledon or offices where bosses hang signs declaring that they are the boss. Ethical indecision, moral compromise, spiritual surrender, retaliation after retaliation all take their toll.

There are basically two kinds of pressure that come to all of us. Some pressures are internal. These are the ones that go on in our own mind and heart. Others may not even be aware of the battle we are fighting within. Should I do this or should I do that? Should I give this up or should I give that up?

You and I have been there, haven't we? If only life were simpler. If only there was only one side to every issue--if we did not have to make choices--if we did not have to prioritize.

The other kind of pressure we face is external pressure. Herod had a choice to make between listening to John's advice or not. Had Herod listened to the internal pressure brought on by John's advice in the first place and put away his brother's wife, he would not have been susceptible to the external pressure of making promises to his dancing step-daughter. If Herod had dealt with his internal pressure, he wouldn't have had to deal with the external peer pressure—fear pressure.

How are you doing under pressure? Some of you may be experiencing external pressure with someone who is opposing you, hurting you, and perhaps even persecuting you. Maybe you are experiencing internal pressure to go against what you know is right, or struggling against the pressure to do what you know is wrong.

"Under what conditions are you willing to tell the truth or speak your mind?" A professor at a Christian college posed this question to a group of young people and was startled by their answers - for them, truth-telling was optional or often restricted to 'safe' environments. (Why would someone have to say the words, "Well to be perfectly honest with you? Are you saying that unless you say those words you are not honest as a matter of course?")

John spoke up for righteousness in an unpopular environment; over ages and eons many others have done the same. Under what conditions are we willing to speak up, set the record straight, or speak our minds? When we see injustice as John saw, are we willing to call wrong for what it is? 3

Leonard Sweet writes that "There are two types of people in the world we despise. The first are people who can never be trusted to tell the truth. The second are people who can only be trusted to tell the truth.

We all know people who have trouble telling the truth. Is there anyone here who doesn't know someone for whom a lie is just a more convenient interpretation of reality? The psychoanalyst Carl Jung once noted that there were only two kinds of people he could not "cure:" schizophrenics and compulsive liars. Both create alternative realities.

The second kind of person we cannot bear are those who DO tell the truth. We can't tolerate them because they see right through our daily disguises, our fake facades. They are not impressed by all our flamboyant "toys," or our flush bank accounts, or the degrees we hold, or the opinions of others. We don't like them because the truth they reveal can be uncomfortable, awkward, harsh and unyielding.

It's hard to know which of these two kinds of people offends our sensibilities more: the liar or the truth-sayer. 4

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians said, "I have learned in whatever state I am how to be content. I know how to be abased and I know how to abound, in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in Him who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:11 through 13).

I've seen the end of that scripture used so many times to mean that we can always succeed at whatever we try through Christ who strengthens me. I can win Wimbledon through Christ who strengthens me. I can win the World Cup through Christ who strengthens me. I can bring about world peace through Christ who strengthens me. But look again. Paul is saying that through Christ's strength he can be content when he is hungry and when he has enough to eat. He can be content when he wins and when he loses. He can be content when he is shipwrecked and when he is not. He can be content when he is jailed for his faith and when he is set free. He can be content when he loses the World Cup or Wimbledon or even when he loses his life like John speaking truth to power to Herod, Bonhoeffer to Hitler and like Saman Kunan, trying to save 12 boys and their coach in a flooding cave. He can be content because he doesn't have to give in to the pressure.

All of us experience pressures from inside and from outside. They come at us every day. These pressures will influence the decisions we make. We have a choice. We can hold it in and be like aerosol cans forced to carry a warning label that says, "Contents Under Pressure," or we can be like John the Baptist and like the Apostle Paul, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Saman Kuman, faithful and true to their principles and die trying... "Content under ... pressure."

Let's Pray. Lord, there are so many pressures weighing in upon us. Through the power of your Spirit we pray that we can stand up under the pressure and not give in. Thank you for saving us and calling us to be instruments of your peace among the pressures of this world. Thank you for John and his faithfulness to his calling. May we follow his example as we face the Herods of our world, no matter what the cost.

Hear our prayers for those on our hearts. We pray for the family of Dolly Dowler as they grieve their loss. Be with them and comfort them with the hope of new life beyond this life. We know how Jesus grieved the death of his cousin John and his dear friend Lazarus. We know that he grieves with these friends of ours, and yet we rejoice in the hope of the resurrection to new life promised to all who believe.

1. Craig Keener in The Lectionary Commentary (Eerdmans, 2001)  
Scott Hozee, Comments and Observations
2. Eric Ritz ChristianGlobe Illustrations

3. Beth Quick The Messenger,
4. Leonard Sweet ChristianGlobe Illustrations