

This morning we return to our walk together through the gospel of Matthew, which we began last year on the first Sunday of May of 2017. Since then we have stopped for a couple of months a couple of times, the latest being this past summer when we went through a number of the Psalms. And so as we begin again by stepping into Matthew 14 – it’s always a good idea to be reminded again of our larger context. The apostle Matthew is one of the four gospel writers, each who gives us a unique view of Jesus’s life; each focusing on a separate aspect of who Jesus was and is. John focused on Jesus as the *Son of God*; Luke on *Jesus is the Son of Man*; Mark (by Peter) on *Jesus is the Suffering Servant*; and Matthew on *Jesus is the Sovereign King*. Matthew’s emphasis on Jesus as Sovereign King is framed within the concept of the *Kingdom of God*, which then defines various aspects of our faith in Jesus Christ - the *gospel* is the *message* of the kingdom; *disciples* are *citizens* of the kingdom; *discipleship* is the *demand* of the kingdom; the *church* is the *outpost* of the kingdom; *missions* is the *spread* of the kingdom; *devil/demons* are *enemies* of the kingdom; and *glorious return of Jesus* is the *coming* of the kingdom. The main common theme that runs throughout all these concepts is that Jesus Christ is the sovereign King who rules/reigns and who alone grants salvation. The Gospel of Matthew is an account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Sovereign King promised in the Old Testament.

Remember also that in God’s providence each gospel writer addressed a particular people group. Luke was written for the Greeks, Mark was written for the Romans, John was written for the Gentiles and Matthew was written for the Jews. Matthew’s Gospel, as the Gospel of the King, was written so that the Jewish people would come to know Jesus Christ as the long-awaited Messiah and King of the Jews. In Matthew 4:23-25 we read that Jesus “*went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.*” In the chapters that followed we saw that in the midst of the growing crowds that followed Jesus, resistance also began to grow against him, as the religious leaders of the day opposed him and openly accused him of heresy - because of the power of his teaching and preaching and healing.

We see this opposing spirit at work in the immediate context of our text for today. In chapter thirteen, Jesus taught the people at large, and his disciples in particular, numerous truths about “*the kingdom*” (verse 51) through parables. And at the end of chapter thirteen, after teaching them his “*kingdom*” parables, Matthew tells us that Jesus presented himself to the people of his own hometown Nazareth. And verses 57-58 tell us that “*they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.’ And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.*” It’s so it’s here, as we step into Matthew 14, where Jesus begins to withdraw from his public ministry of teaching, preaching and healing – and he will continue to do so through Matthew 20. In chapter 21 he then publicly enters Jerusalem and heads toward his cross at Calvary.

In the chapters before us Matthew tells us that Jesus withdrew numerous times. He did so *because* 1) of the growing hostility of his enemies, 2) to prepare his disciples for his death on the cross, 3) his need for physical rest, and 4) the mob mentality of the crowds was compromising the true purpose for which came. John 6:15 tells us: “*Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*” That being said, Jesus’ withdrawals were not always periods of inactivity. Often he was unable to remain alone as the crowds would search for him and find him. And at such times, even in the face of rising opposition, he would unselfishly minister to their needs in spite of his own needs. As we step into Matthew 14, in the context of Jesus withdrawing from teaching, preaching and healing, in an atmosphere of rejection and opposition – Matthew writes of the how the rejection and opposition against Jesus and his kingdom affected his greatest disciple.

*At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus. Matthew 14:1-12*

Matthew begins describing this event by introducing us to "*Herod the tetrarch.*" The Herod family looms large in the Gospels and the Book of Acts. *Herod the Great* founded their dynasty and ruled from 37 BC to 4 BC. He was considered to be a King who ruled – *but only* over the Jewish people, and *only* as Rome allowed him to rule. He was not a true Jew by birth, but was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau. The depraved character of the Herod family is revealed in Herod the Great. He had nine wives, and he thought nothing of personally killing his own sons and wives if they got in the way of his plans. It was to Herod the Great that the wise men from the east came and asked: "*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him*" (Matthew 2:1-2). It was also he who had the infants slain in Bethlehem after the birth of Jesus (Matt. 2:13–18). *Herod Antipas* is the Herod that Matthew writes of in this chapter. He was a son of Herod the Great and claimed the title of "*tetrarch,*" which means "ruler over the fourth part of the kingdom." He deceptively and selfishly ruled from 4 BC. to 39 AD. He loved luxury and was aggressively ambitious to become the greatest of Kings. *Herod Agrippa* was a grandson of Herod the Great. In Acts we read he imprisoned Peter and killed James. *Herod Agrippa II* was a son of Herod Agrippa. He who tried Paul in Acts 25. All of the Herods had Edomite blood in them, and, like their ancestor Esau, they were hostile to the Jews (Gen. 25). They practiced the Jewish religion only when it helped fulfill their plans for gaining more power and wealth.

Herod Antipas "*the tetrarch*" began his rule shortly after Jesus was born; and had been ruling for about thirty-two years at the time of our story. He ruled throughout the time of Jesus' life on earth; his reign ended just a few years after Jesus' crucifixion. It is somewhat remarkable that Herod Agrippa didn't hear about Jesus and his miracles at the time of Jesus' withdrawal from public ministry in chapter 14. John the Baptist had been imprisoned for about a year and a half prior to this, and he was put to death sometime before Herod had heard of Jesus activities. It is clear, though Herod apparently didn't know much about Jesus, he *did* know something about the one who had announced Jesus' coming. Thus he turned to his servants and gave his own interpretation of what he heard about Jesus: "*This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.*" In the gospel of Luke, we read that Herod *then* recognized what he had done and to whom he had done it to, when he said, "'*John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?*' And he sought to see him."

This confusion would have brought up the memory of Herod's violent opposition against God. History reveals that the whole family of the Herodians was an incestuous and immoral bunch. But Herod Antipas' behavior in this case caused a scandal that was particularly shocking. The wife of Herod Antipas' brother Philip - a woman named Herodias (who was also Herod the Great's granddaughter, and Herod Antipas' niece and her husband Philip's niece) had left Philip and eloped with Herod Antipas. In other words, Herod Antipas lusted after his sister-in-law Herodias while she was still married; he then divorced his wife; and then married Herodias (who was also his close relative) - while his brother Philip was still living, which was against the Law of God that was given through Moses. This is what John the Baptist had boldly and powerfully spoken out against when he publicly declared to Herod: "*It is not lawful for you to have her.*"

In Luke 3:19-20 we read that after John's proclamation, "*Herod the tetrarch, who had been reprovved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.*" While the Bible does not tell us how long John languished in prison, it does tell us that Herod struggled with what to do with John. Our text for today says "*he wanted to put him to death*" in order to silence the condemnation he had received from God through John, but "*he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.*" Mark 6:20 says: "*Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.*" In the midst of Herod's fearful confusion, Herodias immediately steps in to orchestrate the elimination of another threat to her husband's reign. She prompts her daughter to ask her husband – in the midst of his birthday celebration; in a moment of pride, weakness and ego - for John to be put to death, because she wanted to eliminate his accusing voice. And we read Herod, "*had John beheaded in the prison, and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.*"

Why would the Holy Spirit see fit to lead Matthew to include this scandalous and grotesque story in his Gospel account of Jesus? Well, the word of God doesn't try to shield us from the deepest truths of our faith in Jesus Christ. The Word of God reveals things to be as they really are. But it also reveals things to us *so that* we might know the things we *need to know* - and to know the things we *need to do* in order to better follow our Lord Jesus and share the light of the gospel in a world full of shades of darkness. These words, this passage, this story illustrates the realities of what it means to a follower Jesus Christ - in terms of our situations, our responsibilities, and our hopes in the midst of a dark and fallen world.

Brothers and sisters, the foundation and character and purpose of the fallen world we live in is contrary to the Kingdom of God, where Jesus rules and reigns as Sovereign King. In 1 John 2:15-17 the apostle John warned us: "*Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.*" What this means is the world is like Herod and Herodias; it does not like being told the truth of God. The world does not welcome having its sin pointed out. John didn't speak disrespectfully to Herod. He didn't violently lash out at the king. All he did was tell him the truth of what God said, which was clearly contrary to what Herod was doing. And that was enough for Herod to seek to silence him in prison - and it was enough for Herodias to seek to silence him by death.

Jesus told us that this would happen. In John 15:18-25 he said: "*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.*" While sin may not be the most popular theme in the Bible, it is the most *populous* in that sin is mentioned more times than love, grace, mercy or joy. The truth is, whether we like it or not, sin is a common theme in our lives - because, while we might be saved in Christ in the spirit, we are still fallen in our flesh. We will be work in process until we physically die. If we don't address the issue of sin, it will become a spiritual poison that will fatally numb our hearts. God knows how important it is that we deal with the issue of sin. God addressed the issue of sin by sending His Son to die on a cross in our place for our sins, so we might be forgiven and redeemed and restored back to God. But this is not good news to our fallen world. In a system of worldly values and priorities, as a kingdom over which the devil holds sway - we should never be surprised by any opposition we experience when we speak the truth of the Word of God. Herod is simply a picture of how the world will respond to God's truth. The world will always love its sin and it will hate the word of God that condemns that sin. It will be irrational in its fear; and it will continually misunderstand the Savior. And it will seek to silence those who speak God's truth and share the gospel.

In Luke 9:23-25 Jesus said: *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?”* This is how John the Baptist lived his life – and this is our calling also. In Christ we have a role to play in the fallen world we live in. In Matthew 5:13-16 Jesus said: *“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”* While we are always to address sin we must also always point the world to the Savior who saves sinners!

Jesus is our King! But he is not like the kings of this world. He is our King who is also our Lord and Savior. Our King, our Lord, our Savior is humbly approachable. He understands us. He knows the difficulties and struggles that we go through. He felt the pain of our fallen humanity when he lived on earth and when he went to the cross to die for our sins. Hebrews 5:15-16 tells us: *“we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”* In Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus said: *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* Jesus offers us a rest for our souls when surrender our hearts and our lives to him as our Lord and Savior. As He is also our King, we are called to humbly serve Him and live with Him and live for Him and share Him.

John the Baptist did so - and many came to Jesus their Lord and Savior. But it did come with a cost because the world stands in opposition to the truths of God. When John was put to death, it was plain that God's purpose for John had been completed, and his work on earth had come to an end. He had not only pointed faithfully to God's Word in order to reveal sin, but he had also pointed faithfully to Jesus and declared: *“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”* (John 1:29). In John 12:24-26 Jesus said: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.”*

*And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus. Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” But Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They said to him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.” Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. Matthew 14:12-21*

This scene opens with Jesus' withdrawal to grieve the tragic loss of John the Baptist. But as much as Jesus wanted to be alone, the crowd would not leave him that easily. Our text tells us: *“when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.”* And so what is happening here as the people see Jesus and the disciples departing by boat, they start following him along the shore. The trip is about 5 miles by boat and 6 or 7 miles by foot. As they go, they would have attracted the attention of those in the towns and cities they passed through which would have prompted even more to join in with the crowds.

We then read that when did Jesus arrive at the “*desolate place*” on the shore where he wanted to be “*by himself*” - he finds a “*great crowd*” waiting for him. And we also read that Jesus’ response - rather than being exasperated or disappointed or irritated - was to have “*compassion on them and healed their sick.*” Mark 6:34 describes this event by saying: “*he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*” The Greek word for “*compassion*” literally means to be “*moved in your gut.*” The ancients described their emotions as arising out of their bowels. We still do that today when we describe anxiety as “*butterflies in our stomach*” or fear resulting in our “*stomach being tied up in knots.*” This word is used twelve times in the Gospels, and eight of these references are to Jesus. Jesus was *compassionately* moved to be *merciful* to them. Our God is not some impersonal force that is indifferent to the things we go through. Jesus is God; he told his followers that if they have seen him, then they “*have seen the Father,*” (John 6:46) and he is not remote from the suffering of fallen humanity. Jesus would have had every right to tell this crowd of people to give him a break and leave him alone, but instead, He is deeply moved over their desperate need in physical suffering and spiritual confusion.

As the day goes on, evening comes and Jesus’ disciples come to him and tell him it’s getting late and so he should send the crowd away to nearby towns and villages to buy their own food. Jesus responds by saying: “That isn’t necessary because you guys are going to feed them.” They look at what food they have and they tell Jesus: “*We have only five loaves here and two fish.*” Jesus then tells the crowd to sit down on the grass. He takes the five loaves and two fish, looks up toward heaven, and blesses the food. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, he gave the bread to the disciples, who distributed it to the people, and everyone ate as much as they wanted, and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftovers. The five loaves and two fish fed 5,000 men, and probably twice as many women and children.

Now we know that the purposes of Jesus’ miracles was to reveal the power of God and point people to God. Well, that was the purpose of this miracle also, but in this case, it was more for the benefit of Jesus’ disciples. We see that in Jesus’ response to their advice to send the crowd away for food: “*They need not go away; you give them something to eat.*” This is not just a request of Jesus for his disciples - it is actually *a command for them to carry out a task they did not believe was possible.* That was the point Jesus wanted to make here. What is impossible by every reasonable means of human endeavor is possible with God. They needed to learn this and know this and practice this – because Jesus was withdrawing from his public ministry, and his focus now would be the cross. The solutions to the struggles they would face could only be found by bringing what they have to God and giving it to God and obeying God and praying to God and praising God for the abundance of the blessings that He would give them.

Jesus’ demonstration of compassion to the multitudes is a model for us. Life is about serving God and not our own comfort and convenience. Ministry to others will at times be not only inconvenient, but it will be to people who are against us. From a human perspective, they will be irritating, but as we see people through God’s heart, we will sacrificially reach out to meet their needs. We should help meet physical needs of others as we can, but the real purpose is to meet their spiritual need of coming to know Jesus.

Jesus’ flexibility to adapt to circumstances and take advantage of them is a reminder that the best lessons often occur in the midst of unforeseen circumstance. The task that Jesus charged his disciples with was impossible for them. The disciples had to learn to trust Him, and we must do the same today. In whatever tasks God calls us to, we must trust in the promises of God that are beyond our own power and simply seek to be faithful while relying on Him to do the rest. God does not define success like the world does. He only requires us to be faithful in following His commands and He takes care of the end result.

Jesus did not call the apostles nor has he called us to be mindless servants who act without thinking, but he does want us to have the faith of a child that fully expects his father to direct and provide. A young child does not need to understand the reasons for his mom's or dad's instructions, but he does need to trust that if a parent tells him to do something - that it is for the best and that he will be able to accomplish it or the parent will be there to help him. The same is true in our relationship with God. It is not a matter of our understanding why He wants us to do something, but a matter of trusting Him that it is best for us and He will be there to help us as needed to accomplish what He asks even when it seems impossible from the human perspective. What this means is - *little is much when God is in it!*

We need to remember these things because when we serve God and share Jesus with others we will face rejection and opposition. The majority of Israel, including the crowds and the religious leaders, will ultimately reject Jesus as their Messiah. This is true for the world as a whole, as the Word of God tells us only a remnant of the world will come to faith. Even now people are turning away from Jesus. Yet while that tragic scene is being played out, Jesus continues to attempt to minister to those rejecting him. In spite of their hardhearted rejection of him, Jesus persistently want us to join him in presenting an invitation to the kingdom of God and brings his compassionate care to bear on their needs. God's prophets – those who speak for God – have a history of being opposed and rejected. John the Baptist was opposed and rejected by the religious leaders of his day and by Herod Antipas and his family. Jesus was the ultimate prophet. Yet when he first returned to Nazareth to preach in the synagogue, he and his message were opposed and rejected by his hometown people. When he returned again (in Matthew 13) he was opposed and rejected again. Dr. Michael Wilkens, in his commentary on Matthew, writes:

“Rejection of God's gospel message through his prophets has not ceased. Much of the secularist Western world is also familiar with Jesus. They pride themselves on being ultramodern or postmodern and cannot conceive how such an ancient message is relevant to our world. Jesus is like a comfortable old shoe that they can sing about at Christmas, but he isn't serviceable for everyday life. Thus, they reject him as being of any value for understanding the reality of life in the twenty-first century. Something new is needed to explain our world, such as more pluralistic doctrines that include many ways to God or an explanation for life origins and meaning that rejects the existence of God. . .

“Then there are those whose familiarity with Jesus comes from their own personal church and family background. Somewhere in the daily and weekly exposure to Jesus they have lost the perspective of Jesus as the God of their lives. They continue to call themselves Christians since they aren't Buddhists or atheists, but they do not have a worldview that places Jesus as the central priority and joy of their lives. He is not an urgent and absolute guideline to their everyday activities, nor is he a present companion in their thoughts and values. Thus, they increasingly reject Jesus and his message. . .

“Jesus is also rejected by those who find that the message of the kingdom places too overtly stringent ethical and moral demands on their lives. Jesus and John preached a message of righteousness about an inner transformation that impacts external behavior. That message is just as offensive today to those who are driven by their passions, who manipulate the passions of others, or who are intent on demanding their “rights.” Many prefer a tolerant message that is acceptant of deviant lifestyles, and so they reject Jesus' kingdom standards. But Jesus' compassionate mercy continues to be extended to those who are not yet committed to him. He tries to heal the people in Nazareth even after they have rejected him, although their hard-heartedness prevents its effectiveness (13:58). Later the crowd of five thousand exhibits characteristics of increasingly rejecting his message, yet Jesus continues to heal them and care for their physical needs (14:13–21).”

As Jesus hung dying on his cross, he looked up to heaven and said: *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”* (Luke 23:34). The dictionary defines “mercy” as “compassionate or kindly forbearance shown toward an offender, an enemy, or other person in one’s power.” Jesus had compassionate mercy on the crowds who followed him, even though many were shallow, self-centered thrill seekers whom He knew would reject Him only a short time later - and he also had compassionate mercy on those who opposed him and rejected him and ultimately killed him. This is the Gospel of Mercy in the Kingdom of God. This is the mercy that extends to our own day and should be most evident in our own actions towards each other and towards those who have rejected Jesus and his message through us. We are to be wise and not cast the gospel to those who would seek to defame or destroy the kingdom of God. But we cannot always be certain of those who have rejected the gospel but who are still open to Jesus. So our challenge is to seek to follow Jesus’ example of wisdom in recognizing hard hearts, yet showing compassionate mercy in offering a continuing open call into the Kingdom of God. Jesus extended his compassionate mercy to the many back then and he continues to do so now – even in our own lives, every moment of every day. Regardless of what state or situation we may find ourselves in today, Jesus is able and willing to extend compassionate mercy to us if we will humbly receive it and then share it!

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.”* John 12:24-26

*Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

1 Peter 5:6-11

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