

“YOUR FAITH: A COMPASS OR A WEATHERVANE?”

A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Belleville, IL
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Jan 15, 2026
(transcribed from audio file)

Our scripture this morning comes from Matthew 14:1-12.

At that time Herod the ruler heard reports about Jesus, and he said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” For Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because John had been telling him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” Though Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet. But when Herod’s birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.” The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given; he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother. His disciples came and took the body and buried him; then they went and told Jesus. NRSVue

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Well, we all ended up on Zoom today. How did that happen? Well, with this snowstorm that came, there was a decision that needed to be made. And it seems that at First United Presbyterian Church, that entire decision has been entrusted to the senior pastor. It's written in documents, in policies. As Stephanie Fultz is joining us today, it's in the document that she helped put together to guide us on how to deal with inclement weather, and yes, Stephanie, we still use variations on that original document that you put together to guide us all so well.

And so there it is. Pastor Rob will make the decision and that decision is made between 6 p.m. on Saturday and 6:00 a.m. on Sunday. And why do we wait until then? Well, there are really two main reasons why we do that.

The first of which is that like y'all, we live in the Midwest where the forecast on Thursday can be 20 inches of snow and then by the time we get to the actual day there's hardly anything on the ground. Over the years that I've been a pastor, have I ever cancelled services only to find out that the next day there absolutely was no bad weather and no problem at all? Yeah. I've done that in the past.

Have there been some generous members of the congregation who like to point that out to me after the event? Oh yeah! I've been blessed with that. Yeah. Yeah. But on the other end, you know, there have been times when I didn't cancel services and halfway on the drive to the church, I thought to myself, this was not a good idea. And I was always surprised to see who would actually brave the snow and get to the church. And you probably could start to name names right now, people that you know from the church past who it didn't matter if it was 3 feet of snow out there, they'd find a way to get to church if I said the church was open.

So anyway, reason one why we make the decision on Saturday night is because we live in the Midwest and the weather can change and we don't want to cancel services for no good reason.

The other reason by waiting til then is because if I don't set a policy that we're going to not make the decision before 6 p.m. Saturday, I am bound to receive about 200 text messages and about 50 phone calls and about 100 emails. Are we going to cancel? Are we cancelling? And I understand because it can be a little anxious about whether or not things are going to happen, especially for all the wonderful folks who volunteer to help out in the church in many ways and I completely understand that. So, that's why we wait. But at the end of the day, I have to look outside, I have to look at a weather forecast, reports on the news, and come up with a decision of what's right, what's good, what is best for the people of the church, and then you just make a call. It may be a good one or it may be a bad one, but in the end, you're just trying to make the right decision.

I think I'm in the clear today. I don't think there's anybody who is gonna think this was a bad decision today. I feel really good about this one, but the decisions that we all face in our lives, well there are all sorts of things that we're called to look at and to judge.

Today's scripture passage, the last of our perusing through the Gospel of Matthew, gives us a situation where a decision is being made about what is right and what is wrong, and there is a voice that speaks up and pays the price for it.

In today's scripture lesson, we have King Herod and what we get is really a flashback because in the first couple of verses you get King Herod reflecting on all that Jesus is doing and saying, "Oh no. I think this might be John the Baptist, raised from the grave to get back at me."

Then this story slips into this kind of flashback. It's easy to miss just on hearing it the first time today, but it goes in this kind of flashback where it records what happened.

You see, King Herod wanted to divorce his wife and start running off with Herodias, who was his brother's wife. And John the Baptist who was a very vocal prophet at the time, speaking about the truth of God's word to the people, being brave enough to speak it to those in power and authority, had really pushed back on Herod on this. It seems there was a relationship between John the Baptist and Herod, and we know this from other gospel accounts, also from the early writings of early Christian historian, Josephus, who captured some of that relationship between the two.

It seems that Herod tolerated John the Baptist because he was afraid that the people might revolt if he took action against him. But King Herod wanted what he wanted and he desired Herodias, but John the Baptist had a few things to point out to him about this. This thing is wrong for at least four reasons.

Reason #1, okay? You're already married, dude! And so is she! That's what we call in the Bible adultery, and by the way, it hits the top 10 list of the old Moses laws. So, no.

#2. It's considered wrong for you to be marrying your brother's wife, while he's still alive. Wrong number 2.

#3. Get ready for this one. Herodias was actually also his niece. So, what we're talking about here is wrong because it's incest. Boom! Three!

#4. Herod's current wife was a Nabatean and the Nabateans were a kingdom near there and the whole point of his marriage with her was to create a peace between the people around Israel and the Nabateans. And so, John the Baptist knew you're not only putting your own relationship with God and with following God's law into

question here with your actions, but you're going to put all the people at risk. You're in a position of power, and when you make this decision, it is going to affect the people of our nation. And that's the 4th reason because as our ruler, you should be making decisions for the good of the people instead of just chasing your own little desires.

So, because John the Baptist pointed out all these things to Herod, he was like, "That's it. I'm tired of it" and he put John the Baptist in jail. He took the risk of what the reaction would be from the people and did that.

That could have been the end of the story but then he throws a big old banquet for his birthday and then he has his side squeeze, Herodias' daughter, get out and dance for the guests. Now I don't know how you run birthday parties in your households, but this is not considered very proper – marching out your niece to dance for the pleasure of your guests and by all indications of the culture and the type of this, this wasn't someone going out and doing their dance recital routine for everybody just to clap politely. This was a dance meant to be evocative, and you can already see that this court that Herod is holding is filled with some really disturbing morality and some really disturbing decisions.

Furthermore, at the end of this he decides to make a promise in front of everyone. King says, "All right. Whatever she wants. It was such a good dance. I'm so pleased by her dancing that I'm going to give her whatever she wants." And so, her mother, Herodias, gets her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. An ugly, cruel, horrific, disgusting request. At this point, the right thing to do would be for Herod to go, "Okay, that's too far. I mean, I know I said anything," but because he's afraid, because he's afraid of going back on his word, he puts his word above God's word which is something that you and I should never do. Someone with that much power and authority, someone like the king there, he certainly shouldn't do it either.

Sometimes we think that like, oh well, keeping our word is the most important thing. No, it's not. Keeping God's word is the most important thing and if you ever find yourself where you are making promises that later end up going in the face of what your faith demands of your life, or what you know is right or wrong, keeping your word even when it's the wrong thing, that's garbage. And yet King Herod does it.

Just to show you how depraved this leadership is, how depraved things are in this time period where Jesus is doing his ministry here on earth, the response to all this is that the followers of John the Baptist, his friends, his family, his followers, they tend to the body and then they come to Jesus.

This passage is one that teaches us a lot about doing what is right, and doing what is right is something that's getting harder and harder for us all to agree on nowadays.

In this passage today what we find is that those who do what is right, sometimes things don't go well for them. Sometimes they get ridiculed for their decisions, but in the case of John the Baptist, sometimes they get murdered for their decisions to stand up for what is right.

This is something that comes into our daily lives now and we each have to decide what is truly right and good. And then we have to decide if we are going to be people of what is right and good, or are we going to be people who simply follow along.

I recently read a discussion about how we develop our morals and one of the things they talked about was that we have to at some point decide if we are going to exercise our morals, or I would say for the sake of us reflecting together as the people of God, if we are going to exercise our faith in real actions, we have to decide if that exercise of our faith is going to be more like a weathervane or a compass. This was the comparison in the writing that I was reading.

You see, a weathervane, and some of you may have no idea what that is, simply sits atop a tall structure and can indicate which way the wind is blowing. It turns and twists according to the environment around it, pointing in a particular direction to let you know what direction that wind is coming from, used as part of early weather prediction. Sometimes it feels like it's the same technology our own meteorologists are using, but it has no stance. It has no will. It has no direction of its own. It simply blows with whatever the environment around it dictates.

That's exactly what Herod did in this situation when faced with a decision of what is right and wrong and he allowed the winds of his own passions to blow him in a direction. He allowed the winds of his own promises to blow him in a direction. His own desire not to look like a fool because he didn't keep his oath in front of his court to blow him in a direction and it was the wrong direction.

The other choice we have in our moral decisions and in living out our faith is rather than being a weathervane is to be a compass. A compass always points at its true north. You can turn it around. You can shake it around. The winds can blow 100 miles an hour and that compass is going to point to its true north. And it's something you can use to guide you as you move forward, that others can look at and use to guide their own actions as well. And so when we follow that moral compass, that faithful compass in our own lives, not only does it direct us, but it allows us to lead

others in the right direction. And so, we each have to decide, are we going to take our faith? Are we going to take what we believe is right and good and are we going to be a weathervane or are we going to be a compass? It's much easier to be a weathervane.

These passages that we pick for worship were picked months ago and when I saw this particular passage selected, I'm just gonna put it out there. Pastor Alex picked this one. I'm just gonna let you know. I didn't pick this one and so when I got to it a little over a week ago I thought, what an interesting choice, Pastor Alex. Okay. All right. But I think it's good because as we talked about the passages and this is the one that she had selected on our worship schedule, the idea is like let's look at some passages in these gospels and these books of the Bible that maybe we don't often get to. We want to hit some of the more popular ones like we hit the Beatitudes but like it's good to hit some of these that maybe don't get preached very often.

And then we have another series of events like we've had this weekend and we're each looking at the news and once again we are each asked to decide what is truth, what actually happened, what is right and what is wrong? Do I need to speak up? Should I stay quiet? Is there something I can do beyond my prayers and the intentions of my own heart? Is there an action that's called for? And again, we have the winds of our environment blowing us all over the place. According to where we place ourselves, the winds around us can blow us in all sorts of different directions.

We're 24 hours away from this shooting in Minnesota and video evidence is getting revealed. It's another example of a time when we need to stop and say what it is that we think is truth, what it is that we think happened, what is right and what is wrong and what should we do?

We used to live in a world where we had more time and we had more trust. So, an event like this would happen and we would unfold it over several days, but through the connections that we have, we as people of faith, are given so much information, so quickly and we have what feels like a lot of decisions to make very quickly on what we believe is true and what we think is right and what we think is wrong.

I think the important thing for all of us as people of faith to do is to be a compass. You need to decide what you are going to stand up for in this world and what you're going to just let go. And I understand that not everybody is built for every fight and not everyone is built for every occasion, and not everybody in that time period could be John the Baptist and certainly no one else could be Jesus, but who are you?

What strength, what resolve, what passion, what sense of right and wrong do you hold, that you've been entrusted with? Just as surely as you were given time and talents and treasures to make as an offering to God, you were also given your reason, your heart, your motivation, your spirit, your fire, who you are. And when we withhold our time and talents and treasures, we understand that as a sign of our lack of gratitude and a lack of praise to our God. And in the same way when you hold back your intellect, your heart, what you know your eyes have seen and what you firmly come to believe, when you hold back what you naturally have within you, that is a withholding of offering as well.

And so, on this day, while things are still so raw, I think it is important that we all aim to do what is right, to speak what is true and live out of our faith, because we have a true north. It is the law of God revealed, fulfilled, completed in Jesus Christ. It is grace. It is forgiveness. It is love. It is sacrifice, and when you do this, if you expect to exercise your faith and never have it cost you anything, then you're in a different Bible and you're certainly not in Matthew 14.

Let's be people who do what is right, who stand up for what is right. Let's be people who are brave enough to lose something and if we do that, then I think we've heard Matthew 14.

Let's be a compass. Let's know our true north. Let's be the people of God because the world needs that.

Halleluiah and Amen.