

Herod's pursuit of power (Mark 6:14-29)

According to Josephus, Herod Antipas desperately wanted to be called “king.”

by [Moffett Churn](#)

July 13, 2018

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

Thwack! Bang! Crash! The quiet serenity of the place I've set apart for tending my soul life is being torn to pieces by the disturbing behavior of a bird. For days on end, the same bird has appeared and proceeded to thrash himself against the window in our cathedral ceiling in an attempt to land on the “branch” of a dogwood tree, rendered in stained glass.

A lover of birds, I know the drill for keeping them safe from attacking their own reflection or flying into something that looks like sky. But while I've done everything possible to dissuade this bird from his self-defeating behavior—I even tried standing on the front steps and yelling, “For crying out loud, it's not a real tree!”—he remains profoundly committed to securing his perch, and he is impervious to any notion that it's never going to happen.

I hate this. I hate that my inner sanctum has been breached and my teeth set on edge by the unrelenting sound of the bird flagellating himself against the window. And I hate that the bird could do himself harm because he can't tell the difference between a real tree and something that just looks like a tree. But what I hate most is how much the bird reminds me of me. His self-destructive flailing reminds me of how I knock myself out trying to perch on my resume or my reputation or my retirement savings—trying to secure my place in the world by landing on things that, in the end, won't hold me.

But instead of succumbing to distraction—or relinquishing my rocking chair—I’ve named the bird “Antipas.” His doomed exploits seem to parody Herod, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea in the time of Jesus. It’s curious that Mark calls Herod “king” since, according to Josephus, Herod desperately wanted to be given the royal epithet, but neither his coveting nor his kissing up to the imperial court ever won him that title. His insatiable quest to secure his position and bolster his image led to many intrigues—memorable, for the most part, for famously backfiring. (Seriously, building his capital city on the site of a Jewish cemetery was no way to make points with pious Jews.)

In this week’s Gospel reading, Herod gets a whiff of something that his innards recognize as the real deal. This is a defining moment for Herod. The kingdom to which all human power arrangements must answer is emerging right in front of him, and he finds it provocative. (He asks probing questions and he “fears” John, the foreteller of that kingdom.) But with all the information he has, Herod comes to the wrong conclusion. He decides that saving face in front of his besotted guests and his dysfunctional family is more important than saving John and leaning into whatever is afoot with the provocative Jesus.

Herod is often caricatured as a villain or a pusillanimous wimp. (Alice Cooper’s vaudevillian interpretation in *Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert* is downright delectable.) But I think perhaps Herod’s real thorn in the flesh is his inability to see the difference between real power and something that just poses as power by flashing and flexing and pressing its advantage. Like a bird trying to grab hold of a 2-D branch, Herod keeps grasping for something he thinks will secure his hold on power, as well as his place in his family tree. Meanwhile, John the Baptist, a man held firmly in the grip of a power not his own, embodies the regency Herod will chase for the rest of his life.

Spurred on by his pretense to sovereignty (and by his string-pulling wife), the tetrarch kept petitioning the emperor to make him king. But his scheming only served to hasten his ruin. After advancing his cause one too many times, Herod was relieved of his realm and banished to Gaul—a place where, presumably, he had no standing whatsoever.

Antipas the bird has abandoned his project. I suppose he was ruffled by the comparison.