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**Kingdom of Heaven Choices**  
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The Doctor had two rules: Don't mention the book *Frankenstein* and Don't interfere with history. These rules were introduced at the beginning of an episode of the popular BBC science fiction series *Doctor Who* called *Haunting of Villa Diodati*. In this episode The Doctor and her companions visit author Mary Shelley in June of 1816 when she and her soon to be husband the poet Percy Shelley were staying with Lord Byron in Lake Geneva, Switzerland. That is the summer Mary Shelley is said to have been inspired to write her novel *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* which literary scholars say was the beginning of the science fiction genre. It is a thrilling premise: The Doctor, one of Syfy's longest running and well-loved characters present when the genre was born.

However, since it is an episode of *Doctor Who*, its easy to guess this won't be an enjoyable witness of history. Instead, the groundbreaking novel, its author, and the other prominent literary figures are threatened by an unseen force.

Eventually we discover the cause of all the strife is Percy Shelley infected with an alien substance that is about kill him. This substance is valuable to a villain who will use it to destroy all humankind. The part of the episode where all this tension culminates is when The Doctor realizes she must make a choice. And it's not an easy choice. She must decide to try and save Percy Shelley by removing the substance that is harming him, which means the villain would be able to get it and destroy all humanity or let Percy die, and perhaps save humanity at the cost of his life.

To one of her companions, it seemed to be an easy choice. Let Percy die. It's the sacrifice he said he was willing to make. But for The Doctor, it's not that easy. It goes back to her rules from the beginning of the episode: Don't mention *Frankenstein* and Don't interfere with history. Turns out the situation is even more complicated because she also promised if she came across the villain in this episode, she wouldn't give it what it wanted. "Sometimes," The Doctor summed up the situation, "even I can't win." In other words, she was in a situation where she could not keep all her promises.

One of the reasons I love *Doctor Who* is because of how the character handles situations like this one. This is not the first time The Doctor has had to choose between an individual and the world. What I love about The Doctor is no matter the pressure she (or he, depending on who is playing the character) gets from the other characters or the situation, The Doctor always chooses the individual. This is a strong choice because it shows The Doctor values the individual and the contributions that individual will make even if those contributions can't be seen at that moment. They will still have a meaningful impact on the world. Percy Shelley, The Doctor reminded her companions, matters. His words matter and will influence thousands of people. To me, this is an example of living into the belief that every life is valuable and has meaning, much like we proclaim in our Baptismal vows when we promise to respect the dignity every human being. We know from life experience that is easier said than done, which is why I find it reassuring to watch The Doctor live into that promise, even when it means breaking other promises.

I was reminded of this characteristic of The Doctor after reflecting on today's Gospel reading where we witness a significantly different choice, one that reflects a significantly different value.

Today's Gospel is the story of Herod, King of the Jews, so called because he oversaw the region of Galilee. However, his title is honorary at best, given to him not by religious leaders but by the Roman government who had the real ruling power at the time. Herod was the son of Herod the Great, the ruler who built the beautiful temple in Jerusalem that was said to be incredible before it was destroyed. The temple was only one of King Herod the Great's many accomplishments. Historians usually describe him as a political genius and generous ruler. That was a lot to live up to and would make it difficult for anyone who had to follow in his footsteps. His son, the Herod in today's Gospel has not been remembered kindly by historians. He was said to be politically inept. Eventually, he failed to remain in favor with the Roman authorities, was stripped of his title and sent away, but that is not where we find him in today's Gospel.

In our Gospel today Herod was still king and was throwing a big party for his birthday. Notice this is not a party of family and friends; it was not an occasion to kick back, relax, and have a good time. This was a party for people in high places: courtiers, officers, and regional leaders. This was a party to curry favor, one for political gain.

It's a party that is detailed in Mark's Gospel, but the events in our Gospel today do not match what historians have recorded about Herod. That's okay because the author of Mark isn't giving facts like a history professor. Instead, the author of Mark's Gospel is giving us a lesson in theology by giving us a glimpse at the corruption of the title *King of the Jews* by showing how Herod and his family were not living out the tenets of Jewish faith but were doing whatever was necessary to gain political power in a world ruled by Rome. This is most likely the reason for mentioning the wife and husband swapping and the dance of Herodias' daughter.

That dance usually gets a lot of attention in sermons, artwork, commentaries, books, and movies. It's hard to not look at it. Almost like if we ourselves were the puppet king sitting comfortably on a throne being entertained. But that might not be why the author of Mark included it. Biblical scholars don't agree on the details of the girl and her dance. Some say she was as young as twelve, others say she was as old as nineteen. Some historians point out the customs of the time would not allow the daughter of royalty to perform at a party; such an act would have been considered improper. Whether or not it really happened, perhaps it was mentioned to show how improper a ruler Herod was for allowing it.

The exchange about daughter asking mother what to ask Herod for as a reward for her performance might not have happened either, but for the narrative it shifts the blame for John the Baptist's death from Herod to his wife. It is possible Herodias was afraid their political power was waning and as a woman would have been powerless to do anything about this herself. So, manipulating her husband to kill a man whose words of criticism he was listening to might be the only way she thought she could help their cause, even if it meant making her daughter into a means to obtain a desired end. However we look at it, it's easy to imagine the many levels of intrigue at play in this party.

The party mood was dampened when Herodias' daughter asked for the death of John the Baptist. This request didn't just stop the party, it highlighted the tension of the situation because it was a test of the kind of person, the kind of ruler, the kind of king, Herod was. It was a political request. It was also a religious one. As King of the Jews, would Herod execute the leader of a Jewish prophetic movement?

Like the episode in *Doctor Who*, we can sense the tension in this request because Herod knew it was wrong to execute John the Baptist, but he had made a promise in front of the politically powerful people in the room, and he didn't want to appear weak. Perhaps he had intended his offer to the girl for anything she wanted to be an expression of extravagant generosity, like his father before him. Perhaps he had not thought at all, was drunk with wine and numb from being entertained and just spoke without thinking. Whatever the reason for his promise, we can tell from his answer to the girl's request what Herod valued: the opinion of the people in the room. To him that was more valuable than the life of a human being.

It's a tragic story. One we might find ourselves relating to a little more closely than we like to admit if we think about it. Herod and Herodias aren't the first nor the last persons trying to work their way through systems and institutions that care more about money, power, and privilege than people. It's a tale as old as time, and a kingdom we are all too familiar with. But it is not the Kingdom of God. It is not the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed had come near and is not the Kingdom John the Baptist was preparing people for. It's not the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus described in his parables. Herod is not the Good Shepherd who will leave the 99 sheep to search out and find the 1 lost sheep and bring it tenderly home again.

Which brings us back to the beginning of today's Gospel reading where we read about how word about Jesus had been spreading. People had heard about Jesus; his teachings and healings and they couldn't help but wonder about him. They wondered who he was. Some thought he was a prophet from the past returned like a time traveler. Some thought he was Elijah whose return signaled the arrival of the Messiah, the true King of the Jews. But Herod was in the camp who believed Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead.

Which shows that despite talking with John the Baptist, perhaps Herod had missed the part of John's message that he was preparing the way for the Messiah. Perhaps Herod preferred the theory Jesus was John the Baptist because it gave meaning and importance to his decision to have John executed, redeeming not John, but Herod. Which shows how easy it is to make Jesus into what people want Jesus to be instead of letting Jesus be who he is.

If you are looking for the Good News of Jesus in today's Gospel, it's not easy to find. Herod and his political striving and insecurity takes up most of the words. Sometimes it is like that. The kingdom of the world that makes promises it never intends to keep if we just do what makes it feel good can keep us from seeing the opportunities to stand in and live our faith.

That's why I disagree with The Doctor when she said, 'sometimes even she can't win.' Maybe it isn't about winning or losing. Perhaps it is as simple and as challenging as choosing to practice and live into those Kingdom of Heaven values we express in our Baptismal vows. Perhaps that choice is choosing to refuse to participate in the kingdom of the world intrigues that are still prevalent in society that ask us to choose privilege over the wellbeing of others. This practice might sound scary or intimidating, which is why I am reassured whenever I watch The Doctor act this choice out in the world of science fiction. She reminds me every time we choose God's Kingdom, where there is room for us all and no one is considered disposable, we will find Jesus and his resurrection life growing in our midst. And that is the hope and healing of the Kingdom of Heaven the world needs.