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## *Don't Wake Up in a Roadside Ditch*

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**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George M. Maxwell, Jr.  
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 10 - Year B**

I like commercials.

This comes as a bit of a surprise to me.

I used to think that commercials were just an opportunity to do something else-like go to the refrigerator, or fast-forward to the rest of the game, or check my emails.

You never know when that urgent, life-altering message might come through!

But, recently, I've been paying attention to the commercials.

They're often very creative. And, sometimes, they sound like modern-day morality tales. They make me laugh at some inescapable truth about human nature.

The funniest ones I've seen this year are part of a series called the "Don't X" campaign.

My favorite commercial is titled "Don't Wake Up in a Roadside Ditch."

It's about a man who gets so upset with having to wait for customer support to fix his cable service that he tries to "blow off steam" by playing a game of racquetball with a friend.

As the game goes on, he gets more and more aggressive. Finally, he slams a shot into the wall that bounces back and hits him in the eye.

He has to go to the emergency room, where a doctor gives him an eye patch.

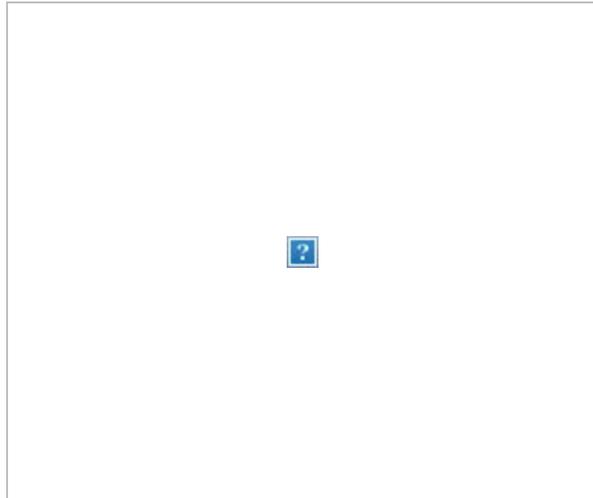
Then, he has to take the bus home.

Several of the local thugs notice him on the bus. They think he's a tough guy because he's wearing an eye patch.

They chase him off of the bus and down the road because they want to prove that they are tougher than he is.

In the end, he wakes up bruised and battered in a roadside ditch.

The commercial really is a work of art.



The scenes are short and fast, each cutting to the next with the inevitability of falling dominos.

The voiceover gives it all a serious tone. It is, after all, the voice of the CBS news show "60 Minutes."

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When your cable company keeps you on hold, you get angry.

When you get angry, you go blow off steam.

When you go blow off steam, accidents happen.

When accidents happen, you get an eye patch.

When you get an eye patch, people think you're tough.

When people think you're tough, people want to see how tough.

And when people want to see how tough, you wake up in a roadside ditch.

Don't wake up in a roadside ditch.

Get rid of Cable and upgrade to DIRECTV.

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I find myself laughing at the guy in the ditch.

The commercial even reminds me a little of the children's story, "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie." You know the story. A generous boy shares a cookie with a hungry mouse, which triggers a series of events that kept him busy taking care of the mouse all day.

The words linger in your ear. "If you give a mouse a cookie, he's going to ask for a glass of milk. When you give him the milk, he'll probably ask you for a straw. ..." And on and on it goes for the rest of the day.

But, the commercial also makes me a little uneasy, as if something more threatening is lurking there.

If I pause for just a minute, I realize that I know that guy in the ditch. I recognize the helplessness on his face, and the sadness in his eyes.

He makes what seems like an inconsequential decision. Suddenly, he finds himself in the grips of something he doesn't understand. And, his whole life is spiraling out of control.

This, I suspect, is exactly how Herod feels.

Herod, I think, actually likes John the Baptist. He calls him from time to time. He enjoys listening to him talk. Perhaps the king admires the prophet's integrity, his respect for the truth, and the high esteem in which the people hold him.

It's true that Herod throws John into prison. But, looking back on it, his action appears to be more about protecting John than punishing him.

Herod, however, finds himself in the grips of something he doesn't understand.

It starts with a bad habit. Herod always wants whatever other people want, seemingly just because they want it. And, when he can't break this habit, his life goes spiraling out of control.

John the Baptist tries to save him.

When Herod steals his brother's wife, Herodias, John warns him.

Herod may love Herodias, but it looks like she is just the prize for winning the battle with his brother. It looks like Herod cares more about getting the best of his brother than about having her. Herod appears to be moved more by sibling rivalry than by romance.

The marriage is illegal, of course. I suspect that John is concerned that Herod is breaking the law. But, I think that John is more concerned that Herod's habit is destroying his relationships. He turns Herodias from a person into a thing, and his brother from a friend into an enemy.

I think that John is concerned that, in winning the battle with his brother, Herod is losing the war for his soul.

You see, the real problem with always wanting what other people want is not just that it can't make you happy-though it can't.

It's that it prevents you from ever being in real relationship with anyone else.

Think about Herodias.

She realizes that she is just the prize in Herod's battle with his brother. No sooner does Herod win her than he puts her on the shelf. She doesn't even have enough influence with him to convince him to get rid of an insignificant prophet.

But, she understands the nature of Herod's habit.

She understands that she needs another prize for Herod to want. So, she creates one. She makes her daughter, Salome, the prize.

Salome's dance of seven veils delights the crowd of powerful people that have gathered in the palace. And, Herod does what Herodias knew he would do. Once he sees how Salome has captured the collective imagination of the crowd, Herod decides that he must have her for himself.

Acting as if under a spell, Herod offers Salome a lavish reward-anything she wants, even one half of his kingdom.

Salome, in her innocence, does not even know how to respond. She doesn't have any wants of her own. But, she knows where to go to find them. She looks to her mother to determine what she should want. Her mother is her model.

Herodias, of course, tells her daughter to ask for the prophet's life. Salome takes the command literally. She asks for "the head of John the Baptist, here and now, on a platter."

Herod is trapped in his habit.

He wants to save John. But, he lacks the courage to stand up for his own wants. He surrenders to the crowd. He gives them what they want in order to protect what they have already given him.

This, of course, is just what John warns Herod about. The prophet reveals the truth about Herod's habit, about always wanting what other people want. But, Herod won't stop wanting long enough to hear what John is saying to him.

By the time Herod realizes the truth, it's too late. His wanting what others want has already left him bruised and battered.

It's as if he woke up in a roadside ditch of desire.

Thankfully, it's not too late for us!

We still have a chance to hear the truth of John's warning. We still have a chance to avoid being trapped in Herod's habit of always wanting what other people want just because they want it.

We just have to do three things.

First, we have to learn to recognize when we are falling into Herod's habit.

You probably know the signs already—for me, it's the tension in my stomach; the feeling that, if I could just have what she's having, I would be happy; or the fear that somehow my whole being depends on being acknowledged as right on this particular issue, in this particular place, at this particular time.

We have to learn to read the signs.

Second, we have to learn to pause for a moment when we realize that we are doing it again.

My image for this is Jesus writing in the dust, after getting the attention of the crowd who is so eager to stone the adulterous woman. He just pauses, and writes in the dust. We aren't told what he writes. It isn't important. It's the pause that matters, the break in the spell that holds the crowd, the chance to breathe, the creation of the space in which God can be seen. It gives each person in the crowd a chance to see what is happening to him, to see that standing before him is a real person.

We have to learn to pause at the right time.

Finally, we have to learn to find a new model for our desires.

We will always look to someone else to see what we should want. But, we can choose who our model will be. We can choose to get rid of our human models and upgrade to the model that God has given us, the model that Paul calls the mind of Christ. We can choose to stop wanting what others want and start wanting what God wants.

We have to learn how to take on the mind of Christ.

I like commercials.

Recently, I've been paying more attention to them. I like their creativity and their ability to make me laugh at some of the inescapable truths about human nature.

And, I've noticed that they are good at telling me what I should want.

So, I'm working on one of my own, a commercial for the Christian life.

I want something that will linger in your ear, something to remember the next time you feel that tension in your stomach; the next time you are sure that, if you could just have what she's having, you would be happy; or the next time you fear that your whole being depends on being acknowledged as right on some particular issue, at some particular place, at some particular time.

I have finished the soundtrack. But, I'm going to need you to provide the pictures. I'm going to need you to supply the story.

Just pick the first images from your own life that come to mind.

You might need to pause for a moment. You can't go to the refrigerator, or fast-forward to the rest of the game, or check your emails.

Here it is.

\* \* \*

When you look away from Christ, you see only them.

When you see only them, you want what they want.

When you want what they want, you reach for it.

When you reach for it, you realize that they are in the way.

When you realize that they are in the way, you try to get rid of them.

When you try to get rid of them, they fight back.

When they fight back, you want nothing more than to win.

And, when it's over, whether you win or lose, it's just like waking up in a roadside ditch.

Don't wake up in a roadside ditch.

Get rid of your human models of desire and upgrade to the mind of Christ.

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Can you see God anywhere in this? Can you see yourself?

I realize that it's easier to say than to do, but this is, I think, what the Christian life looks like.

Perhaps not surprisingly, it looks a lot like Jesus.  
Amen.

You might be interested to know:

- DIRECTV launched the "Don't X" marketing campaign in January of this year. The campaign was conceived by the Grey agency in New York and produced by MJZ in Los Angeles. The spots were directed by Tom Kuntz.
- "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie" was written by Laura Numeroff, and illustrated by Felicia Bond. If you're wondering where you put your copy, you might look on the bookshelf next to "Where the Wild Things Are," and "Goodnight Moon."
- The analysis of Herod's desire and its contagious character is inspired by Rene Girard. He analyzes the beheading of Saint John the Baptist in Chapter Eleven of his book, "The Scapegoat," pages, 125 - 148. Any errors in applying his theory are, of course, mine.