Are You the One? Doubt in Herod's Prison

Are You the One? Doubt in Herod's Prison — John the Baptist Skit (15 min)

WHAT

John has been in Herod's dungeon long enough to lose count of days. The man who once stood waist-deep in the Jordan is now chained to a stone wall under a single lamp. A guard delivers his bread without looking at him. Two of his own disciples have talked their way down the stairs to see him. Above their heads, in the same building, Herod and Herodias quarrel about the man below; their daughter Salome listens through a doorway. From the deep silence of his cell, John sends his disciples with a single question. They take it across the country to Jesus. Jesus' answer comes back. It is not the rescue John was hoping for. It is enough.

THEME

Faith is not the absence of the question. Faith is who you send the question to.

WHO

JOHN — Chained to the wall of a stone cell. Thinner than he was. Hair longer. Eyes still alive.

GUARD — Forties. Not cruel, just paid. Brings bread and water. Has been watching John longer than he admits.

ANDREW — John's disciple. Earnest. Has been bringing food and asking questions for weeks.

PHILIP — John's disciple. Quiet. The one who carries the question.

HEROD — King in name only. Late forties. Wears his crown like a bandage. Afraid of his wife. More afraid of God.

HERODIAS — Herod's wife. Forties. Done with John, done with Herod, done with whispering. Wants the head and intends to get it.

SALOME — Late teens. Listens at doorways. Has not decided yet what kind of woman she is going to be.

JESUS — Offstage voice in one scene, then onstage briefly with Andrew and Philip. Calm. Steady. Carries an answer that John is going to feel.

MESSENGER — A boy. Twelve. Runs the answer back across the country. One quick scene. A real human, not a device.

HOW (STYLE / TONE)

Two playing areas, both small, both close enough that the audience feels the weight of the stone walls. Stage left — John's cell. A single hanging lamp, a low

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stone bench, an iron ring in the wall, a chain. Stage right — Herod's antechamber. A low couch, a side table with a wine cup, a doorway where Salome stands listening. The two areas share a ceiling. When Herod laughs above, dust falls in John's lamplight. Lighting moves the audience between the two; both are present throughout. The Jesus scene takes place in a third small pool of warm light center-front — a road, no walls.

PROPS

- An iron ring or hook on the upstage wall, with a length of chain
- A low stone bench or block for John
- A clay bread loaf and a clay water cup
- A single hanging lamp over John's cell
- A low couch or padded bench for Herod
- A wine cup and a small side table
- A folded scrap of papyrus with John's question
- A messenger boy's leather satchel
- A faint reverb effect on Jesus' voice line, optional

TIME

15 minutes

Scene 1 — The Lamp

(Lights up dim on the cell. JOHN sits on the stone bench, back against the wall, chain looped between his ankles. He is not asleep. He is not awake. He is somewhere in between. Above him, faint, the sound of a banquet.)

NARRATOR: Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him — Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?

JOHN (very quietly, to himself)

I baptized you. I felt the Spirit come down. I heard the voice. I have replayed that morning in my head every night for ninety-one nights. And tonight I cannot remember if it really happened or if I made it up.

(He drops his head into his hands. The lamp flickers. Above him, a burst of laughter from the antechamber.)

Scene 2 — Herod and Herodias

(Lights up on the antechamber. HEROD reclines on the couch, wine cup in hand. HERODIAS paces. SALOME stands in the doorway, half in shadow.)

HERODIAS

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Kill him. Tonight. Quietly. Burn the body in the morning. Tell the city he died of fever.

HEROD

I am not going to kill him.

HERODIAS

Then transfer him. Send him to a prison that is not under my floor. I do not want to walk over his head every time I go to bed.

HEROD

He is a prophet, Herodias. The people think he is a prophet.

HERODIAS

The people think a great many things. The people are not the king. You are the king. Act like one.

HEROD (drinking)

I like to listen to him. He scares me. He is — he is the most honest voice I have heard in twenty years.

HERODIAS

Then perhaps the problem is twenty years of listening to liars.

(Salome shifts in the doorway. Neither of them sees her. Her face is unreadable.)

Scene 3 — The Guard's Bread

(Lights shift to the cell. The GUARD descends, bread loaf and water cup in hand. He sets them down on the floor without speaking.)

JOHN

Thank you, friend.

GUARD

I am not your friend.

JOHN

Yet you brought me bread.

GUARD

It is my job.

JOHN

It is also a kindness. The two are not always the same.

(The Guard hesitates at the foot of the stairs. He looks back at John.)

GUARD

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Why did you have to say anything about the queen. About her marriage. About the king.

JOHN

Because somebody had to.

GUARD

Was it worth it.

JOHN

Some nights I think yes. Some nights I think no. Tonight I am not sure.

GUARD (quieter)

Your two friends are upstairs. They have been arguing with the captain for an hour. He may let them down. He may not. I cannot say.

JOHN

Tell him I asked for them. Tell him a man in chains may have visitors when he is honest about being in chains.

(The Guard nods, very slightly, and goes back up the stairs.)

Scene 4 — Andrew and Philip

(Footsteps on the stairs. ANDREW and PHILIP descend, bowing under a low ceiling. They stop when they see John. ANDREW goes to him. PHILIP stays back, hand against the wall.)

ANDREW

Teacher.

JOHN

Andrew. Philip. Sit down. The floor is colder than the bench. I have learned this.

PHILIP

We could only stay an hour, teacher. The captain is counting.

JOHN

An hour is a feast. Tell me everything. Tell me about the road. Tell me about the river. Tell me about Him.

ANDREW

He is healing, teacher. He healed a leper in Capernaum. He healed a soldier's servant from across the city without going into the house. He fed a crowd of five thousand people on five loaves and two fish. The pieces left over filled twelve baskets.

PHILIP

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He is teaching. He stood on a hillside and said the poor in spirit are blessed. The mourning are blessed. The meek will inherit the earth.

(John listens with his eyes closed. His fingers tighten and loosen on the chain.)

Scene 5 — The Question

JOHN (eyes still closed)
Andrew. Philip. I have to ask you something.

ANDREW
Anything, teacher.

JOHN
Go to Him. Do not send a message. Go yourselves. Stand in front of Him. Look in His eyes. And ask Him this — Are you the one who is to come? Or should we expect someone else?

(Long silence. Andrew and Philip look at each other.)

PHILIP (carefully)
Teacher. You baptized Him. You said He is the Lamb of God.

JOHN
I know what I said. I am asking you to go ask Him.

ANDREW
Why.

JOHN
Because I am in chains and He has not come for me. I have been waiting for the King to break this door open and the door is still here. I expected fire. I am eating bread. So either I was wrong about Him, or I was wrong about what coming meant. Go and ask Him. I trust the answer He gives more than I trust the dark in this room.

(Philip pulls out a folded scrap of papyrus and writes the question down. His hand shakes only a little.)

PHILIP
We will go tonight, teacher.

Scene 6 — Herodias Hears Footsteps

(Lights shift to the antechamber. HERODIAS stands at her doorway as Andrew and Philip pass below in the hall. SALOME watches from the other doorway.)

HERODIAS
Who let those men down to the cell.

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HEROD (waving his cup)
I told the captain. They are his disciples. Let them grieve.

HERODIAS
He is not dead, Herod.

HEROD
Yet.

HERODIAS (turning sharply)
Was that a yes?

HEROD
It was a sip of wine.

HERODIAS
Salome. Come in. Stop listening from the door.

(Salome steps in slowly. She crosses to the side table. She does not look at her mother.)

SALOME
He has been down there ninety-one days, mother.

HERODIAS
How do you know that number.

SALOME
I keep it on a stone in my room.

HERODIAS
Why.

SALOME
I do not know yet.

Scene 7 — Andrew and Philip Find Jesus

(Lights up center-front in a warm pool. ADULT JESUS stands talking with the MESSENGER BOY, smiling, hand on the boy's shoulder. ANDREW and PHILIP step into the pool, breathing hard from a long walk.)

ANDREW
Lord.

JESUS
Andrew. Philip. You are wet from the road. Sit and breathe.

PHILIP

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We cannot, Lord. Our teacher sent us. He is in Herod's prison. He sent us with a question.

JESUS (quietly)

I know what it is.

ANDREW

He said — Are you the one who is to come? Or should we expect someone else?

(Jesus does not answer for a long moment. He looks at both of them. Then He looks past them, at something none of them can see — the cell, perhaps. The cousin in the cell.)

JESUS

Go and tell John what you see and hear. The blind receive their sight. The lame walk. Lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised. And the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

(Andrew opens his mouth to ask the harder question — what about him, what about the chains. Jesus shakes his head, very gently.)

JESUS

Tell him I said it. He will know what it means.

PHILIP

Lord — anything else? For our teacher?

JESUS (slowly, with a kind of grief)

Tell him this. Among those born of women, there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist. Tell him I said that, too.

(He nods to the messenger boy, who tucks the message into his satchel and runs offstage. Andrew and Philip stand a moment, then follow.)

Scene 8 — The Answer Comes Down the Stairs

(Lights shift to the cell. Footsteps on the stairs again. The MESSENGER BOY descends, alone this time, satchel over his shoulder. He is younger than John expected. He stops at the foot of the stairs and stares.)

JOHN

Boy. Did they reach Him.

MESSENGER

Yes, sir.

JOHN

Did He give them an answer for me.

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MESSENGER

He told me to say it to you. He made me practice it on the road. He said it had to come from a child.

JOHN (very softly)

Then say it, child.

MESSENGER (carefully)

Go and tell John what you see and hear. The blind receive their sight. The lame walk. Lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised. And the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

(John's eyes close. His hand goes to the chain. He grips it, hard.)

MESSENGER

He told me to say one more thing, sir.

JOHN

Yes, child.

MESSENGER

He said — Among those born of women, there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist.

(John makes a sound — half a laugh, half a sob. He covers his face. The messenger boy stands quietly until John lifts his head.)

JOHN

Tell Him — no. Do not tell Him anything. He knows. Run home, child. Go fast. Tell no one you came down here.

Scene 9 — The Cell at Midnight

(The messenger boy goes. The lamp flickers. JOHN sits a long time. Above him, the antechamber is dark — Herod and Herodias have gone to bed. Only SALOME's silhouette is faintly visible in the doorway, listening.)

JOHN (to himself, to God, to no one)

He is not coming for me. He is coming for the blind, the lame, the deaf, the dead, the poor. He is coming for everyone I told the truth about. He is not coming for me.

JOHN

And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

(He breathes out slowly. He nods, once. He nods again.)

JOHN

All right, cousin. All right.

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Final Moment — The Lamp Goes Out

(The hanging lamp dims slowly. JOHN does not move. He is calm now, not happy. Above him, in the dark antechamber, SALOME steps fully into view. She picks up the wine cup. She looks down through the floor at the cell she cannot see, but knows. She sets the cup down without drinking.)

SALOME (very quietly)

Ninety-two.

(The lamp goes out. The cell is dark. A single warm light holds on John's face for one beat — peaceful, tired, the face of a man who has handed his question off and lived. Lights down. Hold.)

END

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