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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 10, Series B
Saturday, July 10th, 2021
Sunday, July 11th, 2021

Sermon: Vice Versus
Texts: Mark 6:14-29

Focus: Christ died to save sinners, no matter how wretched.
Function: That they would repent of their sins and not allow their vices to overcome them.
Structure: Story-Interrupted
Locus: “I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person...” (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen! Today’s Gospel reading is a terrible story. It’s full of sexual perversion, blood, and gore. Herod’s birthday party seems more fitting for *Game of Thrones* than the pristine pages of Scripture. If this pericope were a movie, it would be rated R. If it were a song, the record album would bear an EXPLICIT CONTENT warning. Yet, worst of all, it’s a Gospel lesson with no gospel *in it*. I almost felt dirty a few moments ago when I declared, “This is the Gospel of the Lord!” *Praise to You, O Christ.* Praise to You, O Christ?! Jesus isn’t even mentioned in this pericope—at least not in the original Greek, which speaks implicitly of “*his name*” but not explicitly of “Jesus’ name,” as our English translation might lead you to believe.

The story begins with Mark's mention of "King" Herod. The supposed puppet king in question is Herod Antipater, son of his father, King Herod the Great, the monument builder and the megalomaniac who sought to destroy the infant Christ. Yet while he bore his father's name, Antipas (Antipater's nickname) was neither king nor great. He was Tetrarch of Galilee, more like a county commissioner than a governor, leastways a king. Herod Antipas certainly stylized himself as a king, and later in life he unsuccessfully petitioned the Roman emperor to make him king. But technically, Herod was *not* a proper king.

Today's Gospel falls hard on the heels of Mark's report of the apostles' ministry of teaching and healing in Galilee. When Herod hears a report of their deeds—and their Master's—his guilty conscience fills him with dread alarm. Despite all the varied explanations for Jesus' identity, Herod says simply, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised" (Mark 6:16, ESV).¹ Oscar Wilde offers a more humorous, ironic reaction in his famous play, *Salomé*, for when Herod hears of the ministry of Jesus and his disciples, he says: "I do not wish Him to do

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

that. I forbid Him to do that. I allow no man to raise the dead. This Man must be found and told that I forbid Him to raise the dead. Where is this Man at present?"² To which, one of his servants replies, "He is in every place, my lord, but it is hard to find Him."

Antipas had imprisoned John because of his preaching. John the Baptist was the desert prophet who came to prepare the way of the Lord, the voice crying out in the wilderness, "Repent!" Whether high-born or lowly, John did not care; he called all people to repent of their sins and turn the Lord for his forgiveness in the baptismal waters of the Jordan. So when Antipas stole his brother Philipp's wife, Herodias, the Baptist called him out for it. There was another disgusting dimension to Herod's adultery: Herodias was not only his sister-in-law, but also his biological niece (she was the granddaughter of Herod the Great). Thus, he added incest to the list of his wicked crimes.

Herodias hated the firebrand preacher who flung her filth back in her face. She Herod Antipas put him in prison, but out of his superstitious fear, he refused to kill a man of the cloth (or, at least, a man

² Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: A Tragedy in One Act* (New York: John Lane Company, 1907), Kindle ed.

of the camel’s skin). “For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly” (Mark 6:20).

(*Aside*: One might think of some of our lesser presidents listening to the sermons of Billy Graham and then inviting him for an audience in the Oval Office). Alfred Edersheim aptly describes Herod Antipas as a “weak, superstitious, wicked tyrant.”³

But Herodias bided her time, and an opportunity arose at Herod’s birthday party. Note the influence of Hellenistic culture upon the Herodian Dynasty: Jews did not celebrate birthdays in the first century A.D. It was “purely” a pagan custom. Yet Herod Antipas celebrated his birthday with a riotous feast. Then after dinner, when he and his guests were good and drunk, they sent the women out of the room and beckoned Herod’s niece and step-daughter, Salomé, to dance before them.

Her dancing was not entirely appropriate for general audiences. And while there is no explicit mention of seduction in our text, Mark

³ Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, 461.

tells us that “she *pleased* Herod and his guests” (Mark 6:22). The Greek verb *areskein* is used for sexual pleasure in some places in the Bible (e.g., Gen. 19:8; Est. 2:4, LXX), although not always (cp. Gal. 1:10). But the fact that Herod should offer anything the girl requested, even up to half of his so-called “kingdom” as payment for services rendered, also indicates the unwholesome nature of his lust (Mark 6:22-23).

The poor girl, put on display for the ogling eyes of drunken goons and buffoons, was no doubt terrified by the urgency and intensity of Herod’s offer. So she rushed out of the room to ask the advice of her mother. “For what should I ask?” (v. 24).

And Herodias didn’t miss a beat: “The head of John the Baptist.” So Salomé returned to Herod’s dining room, that den of sin, and gave her reply: “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter” (v. 25). At that moment, the gong sounded and the bell tolled Herod’s doom.

“And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her” (v. 26).

Herod was doomed: damned if he did, and damned if he didn't. He was caught in a Catch 22. His goose was cooked. As the character of Herod speaks in Oscar Wilde's famous play: "Kings ought never to pledge their word. If they keep it not, it is terrible, and if they keep it, it is terrible also."⁴

If Antipas had read his Bible better, he would know that the Lord would let him off the hook for a foolish vow. But popular opinion would not, and Herod could not let his reputation suffer anymore than it already had.

So he gave the order, and one of his bodyguards went to the prison to execute John the Baptist. A few moments later, he returned with the severed head of the prophet whom Jesus called the greatest ever born among women (Matt. 11:11). The voice crying out in the wilderness was finally silenced. John would never preach again, although his testimony lives on in the Word of Scripture.

In western civilization, Salomé often gets a bad rap. Portrayed as a brash temptress devoid of all innocence, she is often painted with bare

⁴ Wilde, *Salomé*, Kindle ed.

breasts hanging out of her blouse. Yet men often blame innocent women for their sick sexual fantasies. Whether or not Salomé was a willing accomplice, we cannot say. The #MeToo movement has reminded us the danger and delicate position of women ruled by sick and powerful men. (*Aside*: You might say the same about David and Bathsheba!) Nevertheless, Herodias's daughter played along and did her part in John the Baptist's undoing.

John's disciples came to retrieve his decapitated corpse to give it a proper burial. (Even to this day, in Eastern Orthodox iconography, John is often depicted holding up his own head on a plate.) After the funeral, they went to tell Jesus about John's ill fate. After all, Jesus was the torchbearer now, John's successor, the one of whom the Baptist declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

But whatever became of Herod Antipas and his dysfunctional family? Well, Flavius Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, records in his *Antiquities* that Herod's former father-in-law, King Aretus of Nabatea, waged a war of revenge against Herod for dismissing his

daughter Phasaelis (Herod's first wife) and taking up with Herodias instead. Herod lost that war and narrowly escaped with his life. The war ended only because the Roman governor of Syria came to his rescue.

Two years later, Herod Antipas appealed to the new Roman Emperor, Caligula, to make him king of Judea. Instead, Herod's own brother, Agrippa, threw him under the bus and accused him of partaking in a conspiracy seeking to assassinate the emperor. Herod barely made it out of Rome alive. Caligula stripped him of his titles, property, and lands, and sent him into exile in Spain. At least his had this small comfort: Herodias, his wife, accompanied him. The man-who-would-be-king, Herod Antipas, was the lesser son of a greater father, and he paid dearly for his pretentiousness.

Herod, of course, was a victim of his own vices: his lust, foolish vow, and ambition. In some ways he may appear to be a tragic hero like Macbeth. For while you cannot condone his evil deeds, you feel a certain amount of compassion for him as a misguided man. You almost feel sorry for him, much as you do for Don Corleone in *The Godfather*

films—almost! Yet even if he is a victim of his own devices, a villain he remains.

It would be easy for us to judge Herod Antipas and write him off as a dirty, rotten scoundrel who finally got his due—just desserts, as they say. “Good riddance! He got his due.” And yet, by denying the possibility of grace for one such as Herod, we also deny the possibility of grace for ourselves. For if God’s grace is not big enough for the Herods and Hitlers of the world, then neither is it sufficient for us.

We pretend that we are better than Herod. But sin is sin, and all sin is damning unless we repent of it. We may not marry our brother’s wife or force a young girl to pole dance before us, but we have secret sins and hidden lusts. Some of you have committed outright adultery. But even if you haven’t, Jesus says that “everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:28). Which of us, at one time or another, has not felt a stirring after seeing a beautiful woman or a muscular man online, in line at the market, or on a magazine cover or billboard? In the eyes of God,

the sin of intent is just as damning as the actual sin. Which of us can claim that we are not adulterers in our hearts?

And what about murder? Herod Antipas put to death “a righteous and holy man” (Mark 6:20). He executed a man who was innocent of all crimes against the state other than the worst crime of all: daring to speak truth to power. John the Baptist did not deserve to die, but Herod killed him. John’s sentence was tantamount to murder. None of us, so far as I know, has ever chopped off anybody’s head or stabbed them to death. But we have harbored hatred in our hearts and stabbed people in the back by our words. Jesus says that hateful and hurtful words are the same as murder in God’s eyes (cf. Matt. 5:21-22). Have you ever insulted somebody? Have you ever wished in your heart of hearts that God would kill them? Then you, my friend, are a murderer just like me —just like Herod. How thick as thieves we have become!

All of us are guilty of sin. Each of us deserves to die and be damned forever. Even John the Baptist, that righteous and holy man, was never a true “innocent.” All men sin, and all men die because of sin.

Yet God in his mercy doesn't give us what we deserve. "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:10). Instead, he sent his only Son, Jesus Christ—the only truly innocent person ever to live—and allowed him to be convicted by a kangaroo court and executed on charges of sedition and rebellion, crimes which he never committed. The very same Herod Antipas who reluctantly ordered John to be beheaded became complicit in Pilate's pronouncement that Jesus be crucified. And as Jesus hanged, dying on the cross, he prayed for all his enemies—all of us—"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

If John was a righteous and holy man, a prophet of God, how much more so was Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! "For one will scarcely die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:7-8).

There is no gospel in our Gospel lesson today. Nevertheless, by telling us the death of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Israel's

Messiah, Jesus Christ, this story points us beyond one terrible, tragic episode to the glorious victory of Christ's death on the cross. John lost his head, and Jesus bled. But because he did, we shall not die forever. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.