

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Jesus' notoriety had grown. News of what Jesus had been doing and saying had reached even King Herod's ears. "[M]iraculous powers are at work in him," the people were saying, so that they concluded, he must be "*John the Baptist ... raised from the dead.*" But it's not very satisfying to me that a display of miraculous powers would cause one to think of John the Baptist. There's no record of John doing miracles. Elijah, yes, and other prophets, too. So those who thought that Jesus was one of those makes more sense to me.

But Herod had heard something that made him think, this is "*John, whom I beheaded, [who] has been raised*" from the dead. What is it? I think Herod had heard Jesus' message and the message that Jesus had sent His disciples out to preach. For, you recall from last Sunday's Gospel, not only did Jesus send out His disciples with "*authority over the unclean spirits*" and the ability to heal people, but "*they went out and proclaimed that people should repent.*" And you recall, that was Jesus' message, too: "*repent and believe in the gospel,*" (Mark 1:15).

That makes more sense to me, why Herod thought, "here is John." "Oh, no!" he must have thought! "Not another one calling me to repent! I thought I had taken care of that problem. This must be John, whom I had beheaded, raised from the dead."

Of course, you and I know that as great as John was — you remember: Jesus said, there is "*no one greater born of women*" (Matt. 11:11) — as great as he was, he died, he was buried, and his body remains in the ground; if his tomb were to be found today, his body would be nothing but dust (Gen. 3:19). Indeed, what Peter said in his Pentecost Day sermon about the "*patriarch David*" could have been said about John the Baptist: "*his tomb is with us to this day*" (Acts 2:29).

But Jesus is not John, raised from the dead, for Jesus is greater than John. John was but a friend of the Bridegroom; John was destined to decrease, while Christ increased (John 3:30), for Christ "*was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. [Rather,] this Jesus God raised up, and [He was] exalted at the right hand of God*" (Acts 2:32-33). And from the Father He sent "*the promise of the Holy Spirit, [that] he ... poured out*" on the disciples (v. 33), and also upon us, who repent and have been baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins (Acts 2:38). As we "*believed in him, [we] were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.*"

And this gift of the Spirit is beneficial. We know that John the Baptist was "*strong in the spirit*" (Luke 1:80). We know that the cowering disciples became bold preachers and confessors as they were "*clothed with power from on high*" with "*the promise of [the] Father*" (Luke 24:49). St. Paul reminded Timothy that "*God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control*" (2 Tim. 1:7). So we have been given "*the gift of the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 2:38), that we

might be bold confessors of Christ, not ashamed of the Gospel — of “*the sound words,*” of “*the good deposit*” (2 Tim. 1:13, 14) — even in face of suffering.

We have the examples of the apostles, of course, who rejoiced that they were “*counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name*” (Acts 5:41). But today before us is the example of John the Baptist. Talk about a prophetic voice; talk about speaking “*truth to power*” as the saying goes today; talk about courage in the face of suffering!

John the Baptist’s message, you recall, from the start was a call to repent. He preached “*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” (Mark 1:4). And that message was not softened as he stood before a king who held the keys to his freedom and his life.

John proclaimed the truth: “*It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife,*” no doubt following that up with: “*Repent! Turn from your wicked ways, and live.*” (Ezek. 33:11). John did it, not being obnoxious apparently — of course, Herod was “*greatly perplexed*” by what John proclaimed, “*and yet he heard him gladly.*” John preached, even though he surely knew what could lie ahead of him: imprisonment and death, though he may not have expected the grisly death he experienced.

Dear saints of God, we are Christians. We have been given the Holy Spirit in the waters of Holy Baptism, and this Spirit is not a spirit “*of fear.*” He is an enlightening and sanctifying Spirit that enables you to live Godly lives — and to repent yourselves when you fail. He is an emboldening and empowering Spirit who overcomes timidity, who gives you the words to say in your witness, and who even gives you courage to confront sin.

Now, to be sure, no one enjoys confronting sin — not pastors or laymen, at least no one I know. No one enjoys saying to people, “*You cannot ...; repent!*” Consider your children — no parent enjoys having to discipline your children, but parents do it, knowing that the discipline will later yield “*the peaceful fruit of righteousness [in] those who have been trained by it*” (Heb. 12:11).

As Christians, we’re surely glad if the person confronted doesn’t have King Herod’s power. We may not risk our freedom or our life as we call brothers to repentance or stand up for righteous living, but it is not without its risks: the estrangement from friends or family, the loss of livelihood.

Yet, we do it; and not with nastiness, so that we might continue to be heard. Our own Kevin Leininger had an article yesterday about Remnant Fellowship Church in Auburn that conveyed a message against “*LGBTQ*” calling it a “*hate crime against God,*” and even called, I guess, the world, to “*repent*” (Leininger, News Sentinel, July 14, 2018). To be sure, that message was heard all over, as media all over the country ran with the story, but not in a way that reflected well for Christians. On the other hand, the case of Jack Phillips of Masterpiece

Cakeshop also was quite the buzz in the media, but the gentle way that he stood up for righteousness and for conscience, made it hard for the media, try as they might, to make Him out to be a “hate-filled Christian.” Both of these became politicized, but in the former, the animus expressed by the church’s sign forestalled any attempt at a greater conversation and, as Kevin pointed out, any opportunity to speak the good news of forgiveness; in the latter, it was clear that the other side displayed all the animus, and a path was opened to being able to live and work without having to violate one’s conscience by supporting sinful behavior.

Similarly, we identify wrong — it’s called sin. We do it first in ourselves, and also in our loved ones. We repent and we call to repentance “*in a spirit of gentleness*” as St. Paul says (Gal. 6:1). And we pray that we and those we confront actually do listen and repent, that forgiveness may be pronounced, that godliness may be restored, that peace may reign.

But, Pastor, doesn’t Jesus say, “*Judge not, lest ye be judged*” (Matt. 7:1)? Surely He does. And He also says, “*If your brother sins, rebuke him*” (Luke 17:3). So how does one reconcile these seemingly contradictory statements from Jesus? In the first passage, Jesus doesn’t want us to confront another in self-righteousness, not recognizing our own sins. “*Judge not*” is no call to inaction as some would have it, but to self-reflection first, and then to loving concern for the brother. Thus, Jesus says, “*first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye*” (Matt. 7:5). And in the second passage, Jesus teaches us not to be satisfied with a rebuke, but “*if he repents, [to] forgive him*” (Luke 17:3).

Far from Jesus discouraging a call to repentance, Jesus encourages it. And He is gracious to us and patient with us, as St. Peter teaches, “*not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance*” (2 Pet. 3:9). And then trusting in Him who came not “*to call the righteous but sinners to repentance*” (Luke 5:32), who died for sinners and truly was raised back up, and who calls us not only to preach repentance, but to proclaim forgiveness of sins in His name, then come what may — tribulation, suffering, persecution — we’ll have life in His name. For in Christ “*we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight.*” And our “Mighty Fortress” is “by our side upon the plain With His good gifts and Spirit. And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife, Let these all be gone, Our vict’ry has been won; The Kingdom ours remaineth” (LSB655:4).

Therefore, follow the examples you have been given. Be Christians, bold and courageous, living your lives in repentance and forgiveness in Christ Jesus, and in godliness, until your promised inheritance becomes your present possession, “*to the praise of his glory.*”

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.