

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Our collect of the day certainly leads us into the themes of today's texts. The Lord's prophets needed strength to resist the easy path and courage to speak the hard words of repentance. Christians more generally also have a hard path that includes suffering and death, and we similarly need strength and courage to follow Jesus while bearing these crosses.

Today our Gospel is unusual in that it focuses almost exclusively on someone other than Jesus. In fact, our Gospel text is the account of the martyrdom of John the Baptist. Jesus is only obliquely mentioned in the Gospel, though the ESV does name Him. I'm not suggesting that the ESV translators were wrong in saying that Herod had heard about Jesus. It's just that His name isn't found here in the text. Rather, this text is sandwiched between Jesus' sending of His disciples out to the towns to preach and their return.

Jesus had sent the disciples out to proclaim "*that people should repent*" (Mark 6:12), warning them that people may not receive that message well. The disciples returned from their mission trip worn out and in need of rest. And in between, we see in John the Baptist an example of that preaching and its consequences.

Of course, we hear of John the Baptist especially in the seasons of Advent and Epiphany. In Advent, John the Baptist's coming heralds the coming of God's promised Messiah. And so we hear of Zechariah and Elizabeth's son who would "*make ready for the Lord a people prepared,*" by turning hearts, by turning "*the disobedient to the wisdom of the just*" (Luke 1:17). So John did, preaching repentance and baptizing — "*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*" (Mark 1:4). So it was that this "*prophet of the most High*" would give "*knowledge of salvation to the people*" (Luke 1:76-77).

But in Epiphany, we also hear of John who assisted Jesus in fulfilling "*all righteousness*" (Matt. 3:15) by baptizing Him, that He might be made manifest to us: "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29).

Admittedly, it's this last part that we especially like. Artists do, too. Often in paintings depicting John the Baptist you will find a lamb nearby, often with John pointing to the lamb, or often, too, a banner on his staff proclaiming in Latin: "*Ecce Agnus Dei*" — "*Behold the Lamb of God.*" Similarly, we proclaim it as we prepare to receive Christ's Sacrament, singing: "*O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us*" (LSB, p. 198).

Now, we might also think that that's all we want to hear: Gospel not Law, love not wrath, forgiveness not accusation, salvation not judgment. But such

preaching leads to a place we dare not go: to a crossless Christ. In the words of H. Richard Niebuhr: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross,” (*The Kingdom of God in America*). A Christ without a Cross, dear friends, is no Gospel at all (Gal. 1:6-7).

Of course, even John’s proclamation of Jesus as the “Lamb of God” is not without an acknowledgement of sin — we are sinners; we have sin that Jesus came to take away, and God’s word is full of accusation to get us to acknowledge it and its consequences. Moreover, this accusation of the law knows no boundaries. In America, you’ll often hear that “no one is above the law.” Both our Old Testament lesson and Gospel likewise bear witness to the fact that the mighty are not spared the law’s accusation.

The prophet Amos directed his accusation at King Jeroboam and the northern kingdom of Israel. The Lord had assessed them by the plumb line of His law and found them less than upright. An unpleasant judgment was coming, Amos preached to them — desolation and destruction.

John the Baptist directed his accusation at Herod Antipas — not the Herod of Jesus’ birth, but his son, a tetrarch. This Herod broke the law by marrying his brother’s wife, and John told him so — another unpleasant message.

And both of these accusations were met with unpleasant responses. Amos was made an exile: “*O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, ... never again prophesy at Bethel.*” And John the Baptist was thrown into prison at the behest of Herod’s illegitimate wife. Moreover, for John the Baptist, it got even worse, as Mark recounts, for Herod’s impulsive response, Herodias’ spite, and her daughter’s own ghoulishness, led to John’s ghastly and gruesome death — his head chopped off and served up on a platter!

These incidents remind us of the things that true prophets must endure for the sake of Christ and his kingdom — for the pure proclamation of God’s Holy Word. Peter and Tanner, “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear*” (Mark 4:9). God’s word is not always pleasant to hear, for it contains not just a message of redemption, but also a message of accusation. It contains both a message of Law and a message of Gospel—Law leading to repentance and Gospel bringing salvation in the forgiveness of sins. The sins may not be the same; and the outcome, we pray, is not exactly the same; but the call of the prophet is to speak at times unpleasant accusations to sinners, to call them to repentance, and we pray, to speak forgiveness to the repentant.

For there is a sin that leads to death (1 John 5:16) — it may not be the sin we think of. You may be thinking, “That sin is idolatry that Jeroboam and Israel were

guilty of.” Or you may be thinking, “That sin is the sexual sins and even murder that Herod was guilty of.” But I don’t think so, for “*the blood of Jesus [God’s] Son cleanses us from all sin*” (1 John 1:7). The sacrifice of this Lamb has taken away the sin of the world. No, the sin that leads to death is the rejection of the Son and His sacrifice in unbelief and unrepentance, as the Evangelist says, “*whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God*” (John 3:18).

Thus, Luther reminds us that “our Lord and Master Jesus Christ” wills that “the entire life of believers ... be one of repentance” (*Luther’s Works*, 31:25). And explaining what baptism means in the life of the baptized, Luther teaches, this “baptizing with water” “indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever” (Small Catechism, Baptism, Part IV).

That’s the life that Behrend has begun today: of repentance and forgiveness and righteousness and life — that’s all of our lives, too, though foes molest us, though “the earth be shaking” and our hearts “be quaking,” “though sin and hell assail [us]” (LSB743:2).

And that’s the kind of life that Behrend will need to be trained up in, even as he with us will need to be exhorted in holy living and confronted with our sins, as unpleasant as that may seem to us. For we are all surely sinners, and we surely deserve nothing but punishment for who we are and how we sin. But “*God is faithful and just.*” As “*we confess our sins*” in true repentance and faith, God will “*forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9), and we will have life in the Son.

Therefore, God grant us prophets in our day that, whether “*in season or out of season*” (2 Tim. 4:2), preach boldly to us as did the prophets of old. And God grant us ears to listen and hearts to respond with true repentance for the forgiveness of our sins. God grant it for the sake of Jesus.

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