

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today's Gospel lesson is inserted in the middle of the account of Jesus sending out His disciples, which we heard Jesus do last Sunday, and the disciples' return. Remember: Jesus had warned the disciples — they would find opposition to their message of repentance and of the coming Kingdom of Christ. Herod Antipas — not the Great, who had long before died while the infant Jesus was still in Egypt, but the Great's son — this Herod had heard of Jesus' and His disciples' mighty works, casting "*out many demons and ... [healing] many who were sick*" (Mark 6:13).

"Who could this be?" Herod wondered. Various suggestions were offered him — John the Baptist, Elijah, another prophet — but Herod himself concluded: "It must be John." Perhaps it was his guilty conscience troubling him: "*John, whom I beheaded, has been raised [from the dead].*"

Yes, this Herod killed John the Baptist; no, he didn't do the actual deed himself; rather, he had John beheaded. Mark takes us on a little flashback journey to teach us what led to John's gruesome death.

It started with John speaking the unpopular message of repentance — the message that God's apostles and prophets are given to speak. In this instance, Herod was guilty of taking to himself and marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. John had called him to repentance — it's "*not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.*" But rather than repent, Herod had John thrown into prison. Herodias — truly, a loathsome person — held "*a grudge against [John] and wanted to put him to death,*" but, at least, Herod resisted that, until at last Herodias maneuvered her illegitimate husband into giving her what she wanted: John the Baptist's head.

Similarly, in our Old Testament lesson, the prophet Amos preached a call to repent to both King Jeroboam and the people of the northern kingdom of Israel. The Lord had assessed them by the plumb line of His law and found them less than upright. Therefore, Amos preached, an unpleasant judgment was coming — death and desolation and destruction. Israel would be overrun by a hostile army, and she would be taken away into exile.

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. That word is not always pleasant to hear, for it contains not just a message of redemption, but also a message of accusation, a message of Law leading to repentance and the message of the Gospel, bringing salvation in the forgiveness of sins.

The sins may not be the same now as then; 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 sinner. That would be the best outcome ... the Christian outcome. Surely, that's what God desires: "*that all should reach repentance*" (2 Pet. 3:9).

But it was not what happened to Amos: "Go away, O seer; prophesy somewhere else. We don't want to listen to you!" Yet, whatever doubts this "*herdsman and ... dresser of sycamore figs*" might have had, Amos continued on: "*the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel,'*" and he did as commanded. "*Now therefore hear the word of the LORD.*"

The Christian outcome wasn't what happened to John either. "*Repent!*" he had preached to Herod and Herodias. They didn't do it either, but tossed John into prison. There, we know that doubts were raised in John's mind. He wondered about Jesus: "*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another*" (Matt. 11:3)? Jesus pointed John to the fulfillment of the promises foretold in Isaiah "*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy*" (Isa. 35:5-6); and again, "*The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound*" (Isa. 61:1). Holding onto these promises, John the Baptist died a martyr's death, holding fast to his proclamation to the end, even in the face of doubts.

Similarly for us, when we face hardship, rejection, and persecution for the sake of Jesus and we all do in some ways. I've written often about high profile cases, cases that make it to the Supreme Court, for example, cases like Jack Phillips and Barronelle Stutzman and Lorie Smith. Even if they eventually won their case, the hardship was great, and some, like Jack Phillips in what can only be called persecution, are fighting still. And not just in our country, but around the world — think for example about minister Päivi Räsänen and Bishop Juhana Pohjola in Finland for whom we often pray.

Going through such hardships, we too can experience doubts, but listening to God's word, we can also be sure that God has not forsaken us. We can take comfort in God's promises to us in Christ Jesus, that we have been chosen in Christ, that we have been blessed in the Beloved. We can rejoice even in our sufferings knowing that the promised inheritance is ours in Christ Jesus, an inheritance won for us by His blood-bought redemption, the forgiveness of our sins, an inheritance given to us in His "*word of truth, the gospel of [our] salvation,*" an inheritance guaranteed to us with the seal of the Holy Spirit.

To be sure, we don't pray for suffering; like with John the Baptist, it comes uninvited into our lives as we seek to live in righteousness and godliness, as we seek the spread of God's righteous rule and reign; and yet, neither do we recoil from this suffering for the sake of Jesus, but rejoice in it in the knowledge that it builds us up in endurance and character and hope (Rom. 5:3-4). Even if our end, like John's, is an untimely death, we know the victory is ours in the risen Jesus, and we can say with St. Paul: *"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us"* (Rom. 8:18). We can say with the apostles and prophets, including John the Baptist — most of whom were persecuted before us and many martyred — we can say, *"all things work together for good, [for those who love God,] for those who are called according to his purpose"* — predestined, called, justified, and glorified (Rom. 8:28, 30). We can say with all the faithful — *"more than conquerors through [Christ Jesus] who loved us"* (Rom. 8:37) — *"I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Rom. 8:38-39).

It's hard to hear the grisly details of the death of John the Baptist. It's uncomfortable to say, "Praise to You, O Christ," after hearing this "Gospel of the Lord." It's hard to think that those whom God appoints over us as His *"servant[s] for our good"* (Rom. 13:4) could do or permit such injustice, but they can and they do. Therefore, this odious account is good news for us, for it's good for us to be ready in the world for its hatred and persecution. That's what Jesus Himself forewarned His disciples about: *"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ... 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you"* (John 15:18, 20). But Jesus didn't just leave His disciples — them and us — with a warning. He left us this consolation: *"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33).

May we, therefore, in this account of John's martyrdom, find our peace and hope, not in the things of this world, but only in Christ Jesus, in His death and in His life. May our faith in Him be strengthened, that we may sing with ever more gusto: "Jesus, Priceless Treasure" (LSB743).

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