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Pentecost 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Freedom of a Christian”

Text: Mark 6:14-29

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Holy Gospel that we heard today, who was in prison?

You will probably tell me John. John the Baptist. And you would not be wrong. King Herod had John seized and bound and thrown into his dungeon.

But now, think some more; think a little deeper. In the Holy Gospel that we heard today, who was in prison?

The answer is: those to whom John preached. For Herod, Herodias, and Herodias' daughter Salome, were all in the prison house of sin and death. John's prison was a physical prison that would last only for a time, but the house of Herod was in a spiritual prison that if not stormed and broken down, would last for eternity.

And so John preaches to them, both *before* he is thrown into prison, and *after* he is thrown into prison. They are his neighbors, who need his love, who need his preaching, who need his care. They are his neighbors, even after they do him wrong. They are his neighbors, even though they do not consider him as one.

And so John preaches to them, that even as he sits in darkness and chains, they might be set free from their captivity to sin. John preaches to them because, in reality, he is the one who is free. Free in Christ to love and serve. Free in Christ, no matter what the outward situation. Free in Christ to lay down his life for others.

And for his efforts, John is beheaded. And not *just* beheaded, but made a spectacle of, as his head is put on a platter and given as a bloody gift. But this is not to his shame but to his glory - he is counted worthy of suffering for the name of Jesus Christ.

Which now brings us to you. For you know both these prisons - the prison of sin, and the prison of suffering.

You know the prison of sin, for the truth is that you and your house are not so

different from the house of Herod. You know the weight of the chains of sin from which you cannot set yourselves free. You know the darkness of the evil that lurks in your heart. You know the shame of that which seeks to hold you in its captivity. Like the house of Herod, you may look free on the outside, but inside, it's quite another story, isn't it?

For what is it with you? What sins have enslaved you? Perhaps they are sins like those of Salome, Herodias' daughter - those sins you have done for pleasure and delight, but of which now you are ashamed. Perhaps they are sins like those of Herodias, Herod's illegitimate wife - those sins you have done because of grudges and hatred and anger and revenge. Or perhaps they are sins like those of Herod himself - sins you have done because you wanted what was not yours, or sins you have done because you have feared looking bad in front of your friends more than you have feared looking bad in the eyes of God. And what other sins, for what other reasons?

You know the prison of suffering as well - suffering perhaps even for doing good, like John. Suffering because you have faithfully fulfilled a God-given vocation, like John, but your good was met with hardship, pain, and difficulty. And maybe those God-given vocations of parent or child, boss or worker, student or teacher, friend or neighbor now even feel like prisons themselves. Like great chains weighing you down. Chains from which you would like to be set free. Chains of obligations and commitments and responsibilities, where the good that you would do is met only with ingratitude and even scorn. And all the future looks to hold is more of the same. More demands, more languishing; less joy, less freedom; unfairly treated, unappreciated, and overlooked. Maybe it will even be your head next on the chopping block . . .

But whether your chains come from your own self-seeking sins or from the self-indulgent sins of others - *or both* - you have hope. Hope, for the One to whom John pointed, the One of whom He preached, has come. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The One who came to fulfill all righteousness. The One who came not to be served, but to serve you, and to give His life to set you free. To set you free from your chains of sin and from your chains of suffering. To give you the freedom of a child of God. Freedom from sin, not freedom for sin. Freedom to serve, not freedom from serving. And the freedom to live, even now - no matter what obstacles stand in your way, no matter what dungeons surround you - knowing that you are not alone, not forgotten, and that your suffering is not in vain.

For the One to whom John pointed, the One of whom He preached, has come. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world has come, **for you**. To take the sins that you inflict on others, and to take the sins that others inflict on you. To take the sins of your past, and to take the sins of your future. To take the sins that rob

you of life, and to take the sins you think you need to give you life. To take all the sins that weigh you down and imprison you and be the bloody gift that sets you free. For He takes the judgment of sin in your place on the cross. He feels the sting of death and is laid in the grave in your place. He enters the prison house of sin and death with you, **for you**. That in His resurrection, not only He be free, but you be set free.

And so when Jesus burst the bonds of the grave on the Easter morning, it was as if a whole army came with Him. A whole army of people from every nation, tribe, people, and language set free. Free from sin, free from death, free to now live - to live like our first parents, who did not know sin or death, but only life.

That is the life that has been given to you - the life into which you have been baptized. A life where the judgment of sin and the fear of death have been put away and where the sins of others cannot keep you down because of the power of Jesus' death and resurrection. A resurrection which is not just a future hope, but a present reality that you get to live now. A present reality every time you hear His Word of forgiveness. A present reality every time you receive the gift of His body and blood. A present reality every time you lay down your life for others, in the sure and certain hope that you cannot give more than Christ has given to you. For the water and blood that flowed from His side are a never-ending banquet feast for you and me - a banquet where the devil does not dance, but where the angels sing, and a whole kingdom is given to you and me. The kingdom of God given to sons and daughters of God. Sons and daughters born of water and the Spirit.

That is the faith that enabled John to preach and serve his neighbor in prison or out of prison. No matter his outward situation, he was free in Christ Jesus.

And that is the faith that now enables *you* to live, in your God-given stations, whether in prison or out of prison, in suffering or in joy. For no matter your outward situation, you are free in Christ Jesus.

For quite frankly, sometimes, when you stick your neck out for others, your head's gonna get chopped off! A bloody gift to *your* neighbor. And if it does, what will you do? Retreat into your shell and into a prison of fear? Or in the forgiveness, love, and life of Christ, be raised to live another day? Another day of freedom. Another day of resurrection. And whether you are counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ Jesus, or spared from such suffering, thanks be to God! Thanks be to God that no matter what comes your way, you are safe in the ark of the body of Christ Jesus.

So today, John is calling you to repentance and to faith. And today, Jesus is calling you to His Table of forgiveness, life, and salvation. So **come** now, child of God, and live. And then **go**, child of God, and live. In freedom. For the Son has set you free.

And if the Son sets you free - no matter *where* you are or *what* you are - you are free. Free indeed!

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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