

15 July 2012
Pentecost 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“At Home in Christ”

Text: Mark 6:14-29 (Ephesians 1:3-14)

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

John the Baptist never was at home in this world. He was an interloper. A stranger. A misfit.

It began with his birth which was not the usual way. He was born miraculously to a couple who could not have children because they were too old and she was barren.

He was given the wrong name (in the opinion of all who were there when he was born). Everybody wanted him named Zechariah, after his father. That was how it was done; that was the tradition - to name the first born son after the father. But no. His name would be John.

He didn't wear what everyone else was wearing. If he was around today, he'd be one of those people you notice walking down the street that everyone points to and snickers and says "really?" A camel's hair shirt with a leather belt around your waste?

Then there was his diet. John went primal before it became a fad diet! Locusts and wild honey.

He did his preaching out in the wilderness. And he didn't pander to the crowd - he was a fiery preacher of repentance. And if you got into his crosshairs, he wouldn't let you out. He didn't care who you were - Pharisee, Sadducee, Scribe, King. And he'd keep after you, even from prison . . . he didn't care. He just didn't care.

John was like a bizarre visitor from another place and time. The world was not his home. It never would be.

Ever feel like John? Not quite at home in this world? Maybe you wear the wrong clothes, listen to the wrong music, have the wrong friends, or believe differently than others. Just a little out of step with everyone else . . .

Truth is, Christians do have a little John in them; a little bit of weird in them. Because like John, we have a whole lot of Jesus in us.

Think about it. Like John, you too were miraculously born - born from above by water and the Spirit in Holy Baptism.

Like John, you too wear different clothes - the robe of righteousness given to you by Christ.

Like John, you too eat strange food - the Body and Blood of the Lord in His Supper here.

Like John, your thinking and values and loves are different.

And so as a Christian, like John, you're never quite at home in this world and life. Just a bit out of step. For you, there's something more, something different, something greater . . .

King Herod, on the other hand, was a man of the world. He lived large. He saw what he wanted and took it. And he made no apologies for it. Yet even so, though Herod gets what he wants, he never seems to get what he wants. He's never satisfied. Never at peace. But that's the way of the world. That's the way of it with sin. It never leaves you satisfied, but always wanting more. It *enslaves* in that way.

And it enslaved Herod on his birthday. A lustful king made a foolish promise and an angry wife took advantage of the situation. And Herod, who didn't want to disappoint his guests or look out of step with the world, is trapped. Sin isn't as harmless as it looks. A dancing girl, a little lust, what's the harm? . . . But Herod's hand is forced. He's not as free as he thinks. So he sadly gives the order, and John loses his head.

But though John loses his head, he doesn't lose his voice. For even after John is dead and buried he's still in Herod's head. Herod's got John on the brain. So when Jesus comes along, Herod thinks: *John's back*. Raised from the dead. Because Herod saw in Jesus and heard from Jesus the same things he saw and heard from John. Someone who didn't think the same as everyone else. Someone who didn't have the same values as everyone else. Someone who didn't fear the same things as everyone else. Someone different. Not of this world.

John was the perfect forerunner. *Not only for Herod, but for you too.*

Because sometimes we play the Herod or the Herodias. It's not who you are, but sometimes we play the part. We give in to the lusts and temptations and we think

what's the harm? There are things in this world that we want and we go after them, even if they are not for us to have. We want to please others and so sometimes say what we later regret and make promises that get us into trouble. We want others to like us and so do what we shouldn't do. We get so filled with anger and resentment and desire for revenge that while we may not go around chopping each other's heads off, we certainly bite them off, chew up their reputations, and boast in doing so, parading around and gloating as if we had their head on a platter. And it can get pretty ugly, what we do to one another.

And when you do so, do you feel good? Are you satisfied? Did you get what you want? Oh, maybe for a moment. But like with Herod, sin never leaves you satisfied. It just gets worse and leaves you wanting more. And sooner or later, it always winds up biting you and harming you and enslaving you.

There's only one way out of that. The way of John. The way of Jesus. The way of repentance and forgiveness. To confess that we've played the Herod and played the Herodias and listen to John, who though he was beheaded so many years ago is still preaching to us today. Preaching to us to repent - but not only that! But even more, preaching us to the cross. To *behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). To see Jesus there on the cross as the one who became enslaved for you and bound to the cross with the chains of your sin, in order to set you free. For that's what forgiveness is. The word for forgiveness in the Greek is the same word for being released, for being set free. And so forgiveness is to be set free from your sin, from your *slavery* to sin, from the *condemnation* of sin - free to be a child of God. And that is what you are. In Jesus.

So Jesus went to the cross to die and rise because that's what you needed. Sin cannot be defeated any other way. Sin doesn't give up; it has to die. Again, look at Herod - even when he wanted to do what was right, he couldn't. Herod feared John. He knew John was a righteous and holy man. He kept John safe. He heard John gladly. But in the end, Herod's sins and sinful desires were too much for him. *Either he had to die or John had to die*, and . . . well . . . you heard how that turned out.

But Jesus - Jesus who was not enslaved by sin - made a different choice. Because of sin, *either He had to die or you had to die*, and Jesus chose Himself. He would die so that you could live. He would take the death sentence to set you free. The Son would become a slave, so that we slaves be sons of God.

And so Jesus, in your place, enters the prison of sin, death, and the grave. He puts His neck on the chopping block for your foolishness, your lusts, your murder and anger and pride and hate and rebellion . . . and as the blade is coming down says: *Father, forgive them*. Set them free. And He does. And you are. Forgiven and free.

And here's where Jesus surpasses John. Both gave their life, but while Herod thought *John* had risen from the dead, *Jesus really did*. While John's voice lived on in Herod's head, Jesus lives now in His same flesh and blood. Which means Jesus didn't just pay for your sin, die your death, and enter your grave, He destroyed them. To break their hold on you. That you not be enslaved by sin anymore. That you not fear death and the grave anymore. But know that in Jesus, as Paul said, you have the guarantee of an inheritance in heaven. The promise of eternal life in Him.

Which means you are a bit strange, a bit weird and out of step with the world. For baptized into Christ, you are a new person, having died and been raised with Christ. You have one foot in the grave and one foot in life. One foot in mortality and one foot in immortality. You are no longer a slave to your sinful nature, but set free to live in the Spirit of God given to you. To possess the things of this world, but not be possessed by them. To live in the world without the world living in you. And even to lay down your life for others. That when one of us has to die, when it's either me or you . . . *I'll do it*. I'll serve, I'll forgive, I'll love. Because you can. Because you have been given so much more, and the promise that though you die, yet shall you live.

Oh, you'll still have your sinful urges. Your flesh will always want to be served and have its sinful appetite satisfied. And you'll give in - you know it and I know it. But as often as you do, just as often come and eat and drink the food of forgiveness and life - the true Body and Blood of your Saviour Jesus Christ. Repent and receive the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Eat this food that strengthens you sons and daughters of God.

For just as Jesus is greater than John, so this feast is greater than the feasts of the world. For while Herod's feast lasted but for a time and ended in despair, this feast will last forever and gives joy and peace. John lived - and died - in that confidence and peace. You too. And if that's a bit strange and weird, so be it. The day is coming when *all* things will be made new. When what is now hidden will finally be revealed. And when what now seems strange will be shown to be the way things were meant to be all along.

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.