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“Powerful Words”

Text: Mark 6:14-29 (Amos 7:7-15; Ephesians 1:3-14)

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

Words are powerful. Words can inspire and they can terrify. They can bring peace or incite violence. They can imprison or set free. They hurt but they can also heal.

Words are powerful. Think of what is happening in our world today. Supreme Court decisions, changing the course of our country, are being based on the meaning of single words. Those striving for social change also know that if you can change words you can change minds. So change the meaning of the word “pregnancy” and all of a sudden a pill which causes an abortion becomes a pill that simply “prevents pregnancy.” Don’t call people in a marriage husband and wife anymore, but spouse and spouse, ensconcing in public discourse that marriage has nothing to do with gender. And, of course, seek to silence those who would speak in opposition . . . because words are powerful.

Words are powerful. Words can arouse such anger in us that we physically and violently strike back. And even as children we know the power of words. Little ones learn early that calling out “mama” in the middle of the night brings a comforting hug. Saying “please” means you have to do what I asked because I said *please!* And you know which children say “*Stick and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me?*” The ones hurt by those names.

Words are powerful. I tell those I instruct in the catechism: *you know what you never hear?* People cursing in the name of false gods. You never hear “O Buddha!” or “O Allah” when someone is surprised or hits their thumb with a hammer. It’s only Jesus’ name, because the devil doesn’t care about those other names - it’s Jesus’ name that he wants to cheapen and take the power away from.

Words are powerful. In the Holy Gospel today, words are what got John beheaded. And what an appropriate reading for what we see happening in our day and age. It used to be that beheading was one of those weird, exotic things that we heard about only when we read about John the Baptist, or Paul, who was also martyred by beheading. But today it has made a comeback with the savages in the Middle East. And here too, words are powerful. Curse Jesus and confess Allah and Mohammed and your life will be spared. But refuse . . .

That wasn’t the issue in the Holy Gospel, though. There the words that mattered were John’s preaching against sin, and Herod’s rash promise. And we can relate to both. For

how many of us *haven't* spoken words and made promises that we wish we could take back? Sometimes we just break our promises or walk back our words, but sometimes, like Herod, we're so afraid of our honor or reputation that peer pressure makes us do what we really don't want to do. Our words get us in trouble.

But the word of God's Law, too, causes conflicts and struggles within us, just as with Herod. For look at Herod. He knows of his sin with Herodias, but won't change his way. He doesn't like what John has to say but wants to hear him. He imprisons John yet protects him. Odd . . . yet a story we know all too well. We, too, know of things that are wrong in our lives and yet keep on doing them. We too don't like our sin pointed out, when the sermon preaches against you and your sin and not just the sins of others, the really bad people; but we keep coming back and listening.

Herod was a mess. No denying that. But so are we. We heard from the prophet Amos today of **God's plumb line**. A plumb line is a string with a weight on the end that was used to determine if a wall was straight or not. And a wall not built straight will soon fall into ruin. Amos held up the plumb line of God's Word against Israel and Judah and found them crooked and wanting. John held up the plumb line of God's Word against Herod and found him crooked and wanting. So too for you and me. Your thoughts, words, deeds, and desires that are crooked and sinful, that do not line up with God's Word, are going to make you crumble and fall into the dust of death.

So as sinful men and women, boys and girls, we have four options when we, like Herod, hear God's Word. We can ignore it, deny it, change it, *or listen to it*.

Many will **ignore** it, or try to. On one level it's easy to do, just don't come to church or open the Scriptures. But the Word of God written on your heart, your conscience, is not so easy to ignore. And while some may be successful for a while, what happens when your conscience springs to life, those skeletons come out of your closet, and the sin you thought you so easily dealt with is not so easily tamed? What then?

Others will **deny** it, saying that the Scriptures aren't the Word of God but the word of man, or that what they say isn't relevant for our world today. It's got problems and contradictions, is old fashioned, out of date, behind the times, superstitious, a relic from a world and worldview we've thankfully moved past. But denial has its problems too. When archaeology and history confirm what it says, and again when our conscience does too. And then what happens when death rears its ugly head and we're in need of answers?

And then there are those who **change** it - at least, the parts that are objectionable. Keep some, change some, deny some, translate it so that its more in step with our thinking today. But the problem here is: what to keep, what to change, what to deny? There may be as many different answers to those questions as there are people in the world.

So that leaves us with one other option: **listen** to it. If Herod had done so, not only would John have kept his head, but Herod would then have heard this: *Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). For that is the message John proclaimed above all others. His fiery and powerful preaching of God's Word of Law was so that he could point people to God's Word in Jesus as the answer.

And so Herod would have known - had he listened to John - that Jesus was not ***John the Baptist raised from the dead***, but the very Son of God, come to raise both Himself *and us* from the dead. That He is the very Son of God who has come to take our sin, death, and condemnation upon Himself, to save us from all we do that gets us into trouble. From our hasty words that trap us, from the sins which hurt us, from our conscience that haunts us, and from the death that seeks to swallow us up. There is an answer to all that, and it's to listen to the Word - the Word of God made flesh. Not to ignore Him, deny Him, or try to change Him, but to listen to Him. **For His words are powerful, too.**

And you heard that powerful word today, when He said: *I forgive you all your sins*. You heard it when either a few years ago or a long time ago He said to you: *I baptize you. You are mine*. And you will hear it again in just a few moments, when He says: *This is My Body, This is My Blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins*. **And those words are true.** Just as true - and powerful! - as when Jesus spoke to the deaf and they could hear, when He spoke to the paralyzed and they could walk, and when He even spoke the dead back to life again. Those words are just as true as when Jesus told the thief hanging on the cross next to Him: *Today, you will be with Me in Paradise* (Luke 23:43).

Powerful words. Words filled with the power of God's Spirit. Words that convict and promise. Words that condemn and save. Words that show us our sin, but also show us our Saviour. And so words of life. Words that give life.

Those words are what enabled John to continue to preach to Herod even when Herod caged him up, and then silenced him in death. John knew that death was not the end. Herod kind of knew it too - for he thought that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead! But that's all Herod knew, or suspected. What he didn't know *was how that life could be his*. He sought life in the things of this world, but that only got him conflicted and confused and in trouble. John, on the other hand, knew what Herod did not - that life is found only in Jesus. And so free or in prison, John's message was the same. And with or without his head, John's life was the same. For his life was in his Saviour's hands, not Herod's. And that gave him confidence to the end.

You too. Whatever the cage you feel yourself in - the cage of a guilty conscience, the cage of sins past or present, the cage of a world gone mad, the cage of fear and death - whatever it is for you, you have a Word more powerful than all that. A word that sets free, that forgives, that releases. A Word of God, which Paul said this way: **In him**

[Jesus] *we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us . . . In him we have obtained an inheritance . . . In him you also were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance.*

So with those words, those powerful words, what cage can hold you? Answer: none. Jesus is the key to the Kingdom of heaven, the key that has set you free, the key that has promised - and delivered for you! - life forever.

So ignore, deny, or change this Word? No way! Thanks be to God that we get to hear it every day. And hearing believe. And believing receive.

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