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Pentecost 8

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“A King, A Voice, and A Kingdom”

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.

He was in prison. He could not escape. The bonds were too strong. He had been put there by an evil tyrant. How long had it been? Too long, certainly.

Until one day he lost his head. Too much alcohol and too much lust and too much pride - too much fun times - made him speak words he would later regret. *Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you*, he boldly vowed. *Up to half my kingdom*.

King Herod, you see, was in prison. A prisoner to his desires. A prisoner to his power. A prisoner to fear. A prisoner to guilt. These things held him down, held him back. He could not do what he wanted to do. And so he was tormented. He wanted to hear John, but he didn't want to hear John. He wanted to release John, but he didn't want to release John. *He was greatly perplexed*. At himself, at the battle going on within him. And he knew no way of escape.

I think you know what that's like, a bit. When your desires have made you do something you later regretted. When you spoke and then wished you could take those words back. When your fear made you do what you really didn't want to do. When a guilty conscience gives you no peace. Those are the bonds of sin, imprisoning you. John was in a prison, but Herod was the real prisoner. For sometimes the chains and prisons you cannot see are the worst of all.

As I read these words about Herod I thought about another king, one who lived a long time before Herod. A king who did not utter Herod's rash promise, but to whom such a promise was spoken. A young man named Solomon, who had just been made king of Israel. God appeared to him in a dream and said: *Ask what I shall give you* (1 Kings 3:5). *Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you*.

Solomon asked for *a hearing heart* (1 Kings 3:9). He did not ask for a long life, or riches, or the head of his enemy on a platter. But for a heart to hear God's Word. A heart to hear properly. To heart discern the Word of God from all the other voices that assault our ears and our hearts. A heart that would not be imprisoned or ruled by guilt, fear, lust, or pride. A heart that could hear God's Word and keep it, treasure it.

A hearing heart is what Herod needed. *He heard John gladly*. He liked to listen to John. But there were other voices, too. Others voices that poured down upon Herod. Like the voice of his brother's wife Herodias, whom he had taken to be his own. Her words flooded his ears and mind, too, causing him to put John in prison in the first place. There was the voice of his wife's daughter, which caused him to give the wretched beheading order. And then, too, the voice of his own pride, which caused him to not want to disappoint his guests or break an oath that never should have been made. Sometimes the problem isn't hearing God's Word, but picking it out from all the other voices vying for our hearts and devotion.

I think you also know what that's like, a bit. For how many voices do you hear everyday? From the left, from the right. From friends, from foes. From television and radio, movies and the internet. From those we should listen to, and those we probably should not. And God's Word in all that? Tough to hear sometimes. *A hearing heart* is what we need, too.

Maybe we could say that Herod was half of the way there, or maybe a third. For the Third Commandment tells us to *not despise preaching and God's Word, but to hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it*. Herod held God's preacher in prison and gladly heard it, we are told, but never learned it. Never applied it to his heart and life. Never quite let it have its way with him.

Like the people who lived at the time of the prophet Amos, who we heard from today. Like John the Baptist with King Herod, Amos tried to get his king and his people to turn from their false gods - but they pushed the Word of God away. Literally. They told Amos, God's preacher, to go back to where he came from, and take his words with him. They didn't like what he had to say. And again, maybe you know what that's like, a bit, too. Maybe you don't always like what God has to say. Or you hear God's Word grudgingly, not gladly. Or you don't want to hear, because other voices are pulling you in another direction.

Hearing God's Word, learning it, applying it, believing it, submitting to it . . . it isn't easy. Because it means confessing that I'm not the king. It means confessing that I am a sinner. It means admitting that maybe I don't know all I think I know. That maybe the way I've ordered my life isn't right at all. That I need to hear something to set me free from the palace of my own desires, defenses, and demands that I have built around myself - that turned out to be not a palace, but a prison.

Yes Herod, you are the prisoner king. And the one you imprisoned is free. You set him free when you beheaded him, but he was free even before that. For he had a freedom that neither threats, fears, nor bars could hold - the freedom of Christ. The freedom of a Saviour. The freedom of the forgiveness of sins, the covering of shame, and of a life that not even death can end. So John was fearless. Whether in the Jordan or in a prison cell.

What can man do to you when you know the Lamb of God?

The Lamb of God who was offered not *up to half*, but all the kingdoms of the world. Remember that? It was satan who uttered that offer to Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:8-9). But as Jesus would later teach: *what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul* (Mark 8:36)? Jesus knew there was one kingdom greater than all the kingdoms of this world combined, and one that would outlast them all. The kingdom of God, the kingdom of the Word, the kingdom that Jesus had come to win - not for Himself; it was already His! But for you and me. For us languishing in our prisons of sin and death.

That's the kingdom John was trying to tell Herod about. That's the kingdom John wanted Herod to *have* - an eternal one, not the one he had that was passing away. And so John preached to him, and wanted more than anything else to say those precious words of God to Herod - the words of God's forgiveness. But sadly, those words John never got to say to him. When Herod lost his head, John lost his. And his voice was silenced.

But the voice of Jesus is not. For even though Jesus bowed His head in death, three days later His voice was heard again. His voice proclaiming forgiveness and peace. Proclaiming that the prisons of sin, death, and hell have been opened and us prisoners set free. Free to live no longer in fear and guilt and shame, no longer slaves to our desires, and no longer having to be king. For you have a better king than yourself. One much more kind and merciful and loving and forgiving than you are even to yourself. A king who died for you and rose for you and is coming back for you. A king who washes you, forgives you, and feeds you. A king who is generous and gracious and faithful.

And His Word continues to be proclaimed, His voice still heard today. For He speaks through those He sends, telling them: *He who hears you, hears me* (Luke 10:16). So when you hear *I baptize you*, when you hear *I forgive you all your sins*, when you hear *This is My Body, This is My Blood*, when you hear *This is the Gospel of the Lord*, it all really is. It is the King speaking to you and being your king. To sanctify you. To holy you. With His Good Friday-ly forgiveness and His Easter-ly life. Because this King doesn't demand from you, but gives to you and sets you free to do the same. Not to demand, but to give and serve and love.

For He has given you not up to half His kingdom, but **all of it**. That as a child of God, that be your inheritance. That's the reality Paul was talking about in his letter to the Ephesians that we heard today. He talked about our glorious and eternal inheritance, with words like *every spiritual blessing . . . riches of grace lavished upon us . . . and the Holy Spirit as our guarantee. Our guarantee*, for, as I'm sure is no surprise to you, we're not there yet. But the kingdom is yours. Now. It's your inheritance, signed, sealed, and delivered. And as we wait for it to come in its fullness, we are not alone. The Holy Spirit is with us and Christ comes to us.

So as John preached at the Jordan and preached to Herod: *repent and believe the Gospel*. Believe that you are a baptized child of God. Believe that even in the tough times, Jesus is with you; Jesus is for you. Believe that the forgiveness of your Saviour is greater than the guilt of your sin. And believe that on the Last Day, John's body will be raised just as your body will be raised, and he will be headless no more, but perfect. For in Christ, we are the champions.

And believe this too: that though beheaded, John is still preaching. Now, to you. For when Herod's sword went down, John's voice went up, and joined *the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven*, singing *Holy, Holy, Holy!* We'll join that song today. We'll join John today. And we'll hear him. Still preaching the holy one. Still pointing sinners to their Saviour. Still testifying that *take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, they yet have nothing won, the kingdom our remaineth* (LSB #656 v. 4).

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.