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Pentecost 8

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Losing Your Head, Saving Your Life”

Text: Mark 6:14-29; Amos 7:7-15; Ephesians 1:3-14
Romans 11:33 (Gradual)

Before I begin this sermon, let me say that I wrote this sermon - and especially the first sentence you will hear! - before the events of last night. So the connection you will hear, and maybe make, was not intentional, and I apologize if it sounds crass. That is not my intention.

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

If John wanted to save his head, all he had to do was shut his mouth.

Really! It would have been easy for John to get out of prison. Easy to go back to his life of freedom and baptizing. And isn't that what God would want anyway? Not for John to stay in prison, but to go out and baptize more people? Wouldn't he do more good at the Jordan than in prison? So John, just stay quiet! Stop criticizing Herod and Herodias, **his brother Philip's wife**. That's what Mark still calls her: *his brother's wife*. Because in God's eyes, she still was. So John, be practical. You're getting nowhere. They love each other, after all. And love can't be wrong, can it? Let Herod have what he wants. Let him go to hell. You did your job. He had his chance. Locusts and wild honey may not be steak and potatoes, but it beats being in prison. So relax. Dial it back. Easy.

Easy, but not good. To *love your neighbor as yourself* meant that John had to speak. I'm sure it was tempting, to just stay quiet. You know it. I know it. From all the times we should speak but don't. But this was John's vocation, from his conception, when the angel Gabriel came to Zechariah in the temple and told him that his son would prepare the way of the Lord; that he would be the promised forerunner of the Messiah. Which means to show people their sin, so he could then proclaim to them their Saviour. Because if you don't think you need saving, you don't care if there's a Saviour. So John could not *not* speak. This was not just what he did, *it's who he was*. So he spoke, even if it meant hardship. Even if it mean prison. Even if it meant death. Which, in the end, it did. So John would subdue his flesh and what he wanted. He would remain in prison if it meant Herod could be set free. He would preach repentance so that he could preach Christ. So that not just Herod - but all his household, too - might be saved.

Herod, though, had the opposite problem. He could not, would not, subdue his flesh. (Which sounds very much like our world today, does it not?) Herod took what he wanted

- even his brother's wife. He drank too much and spouted off promises he would later regret. At least he had the integrity to keep that promise, even if it was only to save his own face. Herod did not love his neighbor as himself. Herod just loved himself. So he hurt his neighbor, his brother. He hurt his brother's wife. He hurt his kingdom. And finally he hurt John, lopping off his head.

But *a glorious inheritance* was waiting for John, as we heard in the reading from Ephesians today. What he did not receive on earth, he was given now in heaven. John knew this, was sure of it, that this earthly life is not all there is, and so did what he did. Herod did not, and so did what he did. His inheritance was here and now. So hang onto it with all you have.

This is not new. Or news. There are lots of Herods today, people taking what they want, thinking only of here and now. And there were prophets before John who preached like John, because there were people before Herod who lived like Herod. Sin is the selfishness and self-centeredness that lives in us all. That does not want to love my neighbor as myself, but wants my neighbor to love me as I love myself. So God sent prophets. Lots of 'em! Like Amos, who we also heard from today.

Amos' message was a simple one. God has *a plumb line*. Now, *what's that?* everyone here under the age of at least 20 - maybe 30 - is wondering! A plumb line was simply a weight on the end of a string, and it was used to determine if what you were building was straight, vertically. So if the plumb line went like this (arm straight up and down) and your building went like this (arm at an angle), something isn't right. And hint: it's not the plumb line! And if you keep going like that, building like that, you're going to end up with a leaning Tower of Pisa . . . *if* you're lucky! More probable is that you end up with no building at all, but what used to be a building but is now a pile of rubble.

But you don't have to believe the plumb line. You can claim that your building is fine and the plumb line is wrong. Or you can just ignore it and hope or assume that everything will still be fine. It's not very smart to do either of those things, but you can if you want. And that's what the people in Amos' day were doing, and it's what Herod was doing, it's what people today do, and it's what we do, too, when we hear the plumb line of God's Word, when we hear that our lives aren't what they should be, but are leaning, tottering, but we keep going the way we're going. Keep doing what we've been doing. Thinking either the plumb line is wrong, God's Word is wrong. Or, that even if it's right, I'm just a little off. My life isn't going to fall. My life isn't going to crumble. Thing is . . . a little wrong now leads to a lot wrong later. And look around, look at yourself . . . if you see a mess, do you really think it's because the plumb line was wrong?

The powers that be accused Amos of conspiring against them. No, Amos is *for you*. And Amos basically said, *you think I want to do this?* My life was fine. *I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs*. I was content. My life was peaceful. But God said do this.

God sent me. God put me here. **Because God loves you.** Despite all you've done. He only wants good for you. The kingdom is going to fall. Jeroboam will be toppled. Repent before it is too late. But they told Amos to go away. They didn't want to hear him. He was dangerous. Dangerous to them and their way of life and what they wanted. A lot like John was to Herod.

And like the Word of God is still today. It's dangerous to how sinful people want to live and what sinful people want to do. But maybe it's how we want to live and what we want to do that's what's really dangerous, our crooked lives not only hurting ourselves, but hurting others, too. And we realize, sometimes too late, that the plumb line was right all along.

But even if your life is a pile of rubble - a big pile, or little piles here and there - here's the good news: **it's not too late!** Even for Herod the beheader! He got to see Jesus before he was crucified. God's love and long suffering and desire to save all is far greater than we can think or imagine. Which is good news for me! You, too. If we're honest. If we admit that it's not the plumb line that's wrong, it's me. For that **stress** you feel, that **worry** that haunts you, that **uncertainty** the plagues you, that **doubt** that nags you, that **fear** that keep you up at night - those are all signs and manifestations that your building, your life, isn't plumb, isn't right. That you're leaning and about to totter. That your sin is pulling you down. Or maybe already has.

If only there was a way to rebuild, or to resurrect my life! **Oh wait - there is!** For the Lord who sent Amos and John and all the prophets and apostles, has Himself come to us, in the flesh, to enter into the pile of our sin and death and resurrect us. Raise us up with Him to a new life. If it seems strange to us that God would allow His chosen forerunner to be beheaded in prison, how much more that He sent His Son to die for us - for sinners like us - on the cross! But send Him He did, and die He did, and rise He did - that we might, too. Because there was no other way. And you realize that what we are singing in the Gradual is right: *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!* Which is to say: how amazing, deep, and endless His love and forgiveness.

His love and forgiveness that is here in words of absolution, that is here in the new life He raises up in baptism, that is here with the food He feeds us with that doesn't just nourish us here for a while and pass through our bodies, but which feeds that new baptismal life that not even death can topple. And still He is speaking, His Word still the plumb line, to show us our unstraightness, our unrightness, our unrighteousness, and show us His righteousness and be our righteousness. That the stress, worry, uncertainty, doubt, fear, sin, and death we feel and have not swallow us up, but be swallowed up by Him! That we live now by faith, with confidence, and at peace.

That's how John lived, even locked up in Herod's prison. Those walls, so big and strong

to the world, were nothing to God. He kept His prophet to the end, and in the end, took Him home, where He is not headless, but sings *with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven*.

Which is true for you, too. Sometimes we lose our heads - our sin, our anger, our bitterness, our lust, our greed, making us crazy. Sometimes maybe we lose our heads when someone else bites them off! Or sometimes we get crushed under someone else's sin, or feel the steely wrath of their merciless words. But here we are not headless. Here we are raised. Here we are forgiven. Here we, too, sing with the angels and archangels and John and Amos and Paul and all the company of heaven, to the one who fills us with His life and love. We sing *holy, holy, holy* - that's who He is and what He is. And then *hosanna*, save us! That's what He does. On the cross, through the empty tomb, and from font, pulpit, and altar today. That with John and Paul, we know there is ***a glorious inheritance*** waiting for us. He has given us His Spirit as a guarantee.

And with that we leave this place not the same as when we came. For here you receive. New life, new love, a new song. That in all your life and all your words, the Gospel shine forth. Which is to say, Jesus shines forth. *Jesus, Priceless Treasure* (LSB #743). The one who will be there when all earthly treasure goes away. The one who will be there when your life goes away. The one who will be there when this world goes away. He will not go away. *Lo, I am with you always*, He said, *to the end of the age* (Matthew 28:20). And we will be with Him after that.

So while it may be true that if John wanted to save his head, all he had to do was shut his mouth. But here is your truth: if you want to save your life, open your mouth and confess your sin. Open your mouth and confess His Name. Open your mouth and eat and drink this food of immortality. And then, no matter what happens to your head, or life, *you live*. For your life is in Christ.

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.