

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Pentecost 7B (Proper 10B)
July 11, 2021
Mark 6:14-29

Dying for the Truth

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." 15 But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised. (Mark 6:14-16 ESV)

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit,

God's prophets have a very difficult and dangerous job. They speak what God gives them to speak and, quite often, people don't like what they say. And this is especially true when the prophet speaks against a powerful person, like a king. Amos felt the wrath of King Jeroboam and his priest, Amaziah, when he prophesied Jeroboam's death by the sword, and John suffered the wrath of Herod and Herodias when he proclaimed their adultery.

Yet, this is nothing new. The history of the Christian Church, of God's people of all ages, is full of blood. It began with the blood that flowed from Abel's lifeless body, slain by his own sulking and jealous brother because the LORD delighted in Abel's offering but not Cain's. Many of God's prophets suffered greatly, often shedding their blood as they were struck down by those who would take power upon themselves and rob God of all His glory, and not listen to His Word. And, of course, the blood flowed in the cell of Saint John the Baptizer, beheaded because he dared speak the Truth before Herod and Herodias.

King Herod heard of Jesus and trembled because he had a guilty conscience, as well he should. When he heard of Jesus, he thought that John the Baptizer had risen from the dead and performed greater signs than proclaiming the year of the LORD and baptizing unto repentance of sins. He expected John the Baptizer to come looking for him and avenge his death. He expected more preaching to accuse him and perplex him. What he thought and what really happened are two different things.

What really happened is a criminal act. An innocent man's head is chopped off because he dared to tell King Herod the truth, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." Herodias, Herod's sister-in-law and current wife, didn't like the truth so she sought the opportune time to silence the truth. After Herodias's daughter brought down the house with a spectacular dance routine, Herod makes the mistake of swearing to give her whatever she wanted. When she asked her mother what she should ask for, Herodias, like the Queen of Hearts in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, tells her, "Off with his head." And because of

Herod's foolish oath and misplaced pride, he felt he had to give her what she wanted. Down goes the executioner and off goes John's head. You can almost see the bloodthirsty look in the women's eyes when they receive the head on the platter.

The blood still flows in the Church today. Countless numbers of Christians all over the world give their life for the clear confession of Jesus Christ as God's only-begotten Son and Savior of mankind. We often tell each other to count our blessings. One blessing that should be at the head of the list is the fact that we are not persecuted openly and constantly for confessing Christ, at least not to the point of shedding our blood. However, the times are changing. People are being persecuted, are losing their livelihood, or worse, for daring to stand on God's Word.

For the fact is that Jesus Christ is not to be tolerated in the world, and, quite often, in His own Church as well. People don't want to hear God's Word. They want to hear only what agrees with them or makes them feel good and scratches their itching ears.

What does this mean? It means we too often don't care much about eternal truth. It also means we've put our feelings, emotions, and our personal likes and dislikes ahead of Jesus Christ, His Word, and His Means of Grace. Gone are the days of society being called "Christian." In its place is a society that expects "tolerance" of the need for everyone's truth to be right, except for the Christian's. Those who clearly confess Christ and what He has to say about sin and grace are given "zero tolerance" and must be silenced and canceled.

And what do we do? We allow it to happen, even in our families. When the opportune time comes to speak up about Jesus Christ, to say what God's Word says, we clam up and let things go on their merry way. We think it better not to rock the boat so we let things go from bad to worse. So we don't tell and show our children or grandchildren that church attendance is more important than sports, entertainment, or other recreation. We don't tell them that they shouldn't live with, or have relations with, their boyfriend or girlfriend before they are married. We let our friends engage in harmful behavior without saying anything.

John the Baptizer could have taken that opportunity to be quiet about adultery and incest. He could have looked the other way and thought what happens between two consenting adults is none of his business. He took the hard road and spoke the Truth not to anger the King but to bring him to repentance and the true knowledge of Jesus Christ. And Herod gladly listened to John, though it perplexed him, and even tried to protect him. But in the end, he was used to fulfill Herodias's grudge and desire for revenge.

He didn't realize that Jesus Christ's kingdom is not of this world. Herod had nothing to fear from Jesus, or from John. It seemed his earthly throne was secure, but His life after death was far from secure. The same can be said for us when we allow sin to master us or when we allow sin to master our neighbor. The devil, the world, and our flesh want us to keep quiet about sin. They want to see our head on the platter along with all those who confess the Triune God as the only God who saves. They try to take the kingdom by force, tracking blood everywhere.

The trail of blood from the prophets and the trail of blood from the martyrs all lead to and flow from the blood-stained body of Jesus Christ. Jesus shed His blood for us so we who suffer the slings and arrows in the Church Militant may look forward with joy to the Church Triumphant. We look forward with joy because this kingdom is ours because our LORD Jesus bought and paid for it with His precious blood as the price. Yet Christ was raised from the tomb, destroying death and making mortality a mere buzzword. Because He lives, we too shall live with Him forever by grace through faith.

Shedding our blood, or suffering other distress, for the sake of Christ now becomes an honorable thing. Here we have no continuing city. Should the opportunity arise, we should not fear losing our life, or our family, or anything else, for the sake of the Gospel. Jesus Christ is preparing a place for you in the heavenly mansions even now. You can cut off the head of John the Baptizer, you can stone Stephen, you can crucify Saint Peter upside down, cut off Saint Paul's head, grill Saint Laurence alive, but you cannot silence the Word of God. The more Christ's Church is persecuted, the more the Gospel spreads.

Very rarely are we called to spill one drop of blood for the Christian Church and the faith she proclaims. Thanks be to God this is so. Yet the day may come where you must stand up and be counted faithful to Jesus Christ. He has made you His dear child in Holy Baptism. He feeds you with His Body and Blood in Holy Communion. The Holy Spirit will make you bold to proclaim Christ with no fear of shedding blood for His Name. Follow John the Baptizer's blood and it will take you to the fountain of life everlasting, Jesus Christ, whose blood and righteousness are our beauty and our glorious dress. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Rev. Timothy J. Landskroener