

The Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist

Text: Mark 6:14-29

Title: Fitting In

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Political scandals are nothing new. King Herod would have fit right in, here and now, today. In fact what Herod did might seem pretty tame by today's standards.

Herod wooed away his brother's wife (well, technically his half-brother). Herodias came willingly. She wanted to be with him. He wanted to be with her. They even got married (this wasn't some affair). They were consenting adults. This was a private matter between two people. Who cares what someone else does in the privacy of their own home, right? Who are we to judge, right? No big deal.

King Herod would have fit right in, here and now, today.

John, on the other hand, would not have fit in very well today at all. John would have stuck out like a sore thumb.

In fact, John did not fit in very well in his day either. His behavior was strange, eccentric, even for his day and time, and even for a prophet. John never fit in.

John didn't get the memo. John never learned that he should just keep his mouth shut and go with the flow. John never learned that people's private lives were their own business, and that he should just preach inspirational messages that kept people entertained. John never learned that you don't upset the king, and you certainly don't upset the king's wife.

No, John wasn't too concerned about fitting in. John was too busy being the prophet that God had sent him to be. He preached his message regardless of the consequences.

John's message was simple. "Repent, you bunch of sinners!" John's message was the same for everyone. Everyone was called to repent. Pharisees- repent. Soldiers- repent. Tax collectors- repent. Kings- repent.

No one is left out of John's call for repentance. He proclaimed it loud and clear. Some people took notice. They came out into the wilderness to hear him. Some even took his word to heart. They repented of their sins and were baptized. Some even stuck around with John and became his disciples.

Other folks heard John's message and went back home. They ignored John, just as they ignored the rest of the prophets, and kept doing things their way. "I don't need to be baptized, I don't need to confess my sins, I'm happy with my life just the way it is, and I don't need God or some prophet to tell me how to live my life."

But Herod and his wife could not just ignore John. They couldn't just let him go on accusing them of sinning against God. They were public figures and they cared about their image. And so Herod put John in prison and thought that would do the trick.

But that didn't shut John up. John kept preaching, even from prison. And Herod himself was still drawn to John's preaching. Herod knew that John was on to something. He knew that John was a righteous and holy man. Herod was intrigued by this lowly peasant who didn't seem to care what happened to him, he just kept preaching.

Herod wanted to hear more; he was still curious. But not Herodias. Herodias had heard enough. She wanted John dead, and wasn't opposed to using her own daughter to manipulate her husband into finally putting John to death.

John's message kept pricking Herodias's conscience, and she just couldn't get that voice out of her head. "It is not lawful. It is not lawful. It is not lawful." That's all that she could hear. And so she tried to silence John's voice so that she could get rest.

But it wasn't that easy to get rid of God's Word. Through the ages countless kings and queens have tried to silence God and get His voice out of their heads, by killing His prophets. Thousands of God's witnesses, His holy martyrs have given their lives rather than be silent.

These are the folks that the other John, the disciple John saw in heaven in our reading from Revelation. John writes, "I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne." The word "witness" in Greek here is "martyr." These are the holy martyrs there at the Lord's altar. They have given their lives as a sacrifice to their Lord.

John the Baptist was there. John the disciple saw John the Baptist there in heaven along with the rest of the martyrs calling for the Lord to carry out His judgment upon the earth. John the Baptist did not fit in here on earth, but he fit right in at the Lord's altar, with the rest of the martyrs.

So who are you? Are you Herod or are you John? Do you fit in with this world, or do you stick out? Do you witness to God's word or do you avoid it? Would you give your life for God's Word?

Too many of us are like Herod. We try to control God's word. We want to have it under our control so that we can manage the message a little bit. We don't like getting hit with the full force of God's Law, so we imprison it. We can choose to listen or not. We think as long as we don't completely do away with it, we're good.

We pick a church we like, we find a pastor we like, we sing the hymns we like, we read the Bible when we like and we choose the verses we like, we put everything under our control, and we try our best not to be made uncomfortable.

We like sinning. It feels good. Whether its sleeping with someone we shouldn't (or maybe just thinking about it), whether it's abusing drugs or alcohol, whether its being mean and spiteful and unloving, whether it's doing or own thing rather than hearing and reading God's word and praying, we like to sin, and we don't like it when people tell us to stop.

Herod was not about to get rid of his wife, even though he was in violation of God's law. He didn't argue with John. He knew what he had done was wrong.

Remember David. David was in a similar spot. He took a wife that didn't belong to him. He thought that because he was the king he could do whatever he wanted. But when God's prophet, Nathan, confronted him with his sin, when the prophet told David "Repent!" David did. David repented, he confessed his sin and was forgiven.

Now you will have your Herod moments. You will sin. And you will be confronted by your sinfulness- whether it's by reading God's word, or talking with a Christian friend, or maybe even from this pulpit, God's Word will get to you and you will know of your sinfulness.

And you will be tempted to respond the same way that Herod and Herodias did. You will be tempted either to shut God's word up in some prison that you devise for it, or get rid of it altogether.

When that happens, when you are confronted with your sin, repent.

The only thing that will silence the condemnation of God's law is the sweet words of the Gospel. The only thing that will give your conscience peace and rest is Christ's forgiveness.

John did not have the last word. John's job was to prepare people for Jesus. Once you've heard John's word and taken it to heart, then you're ready for Jesus' word. Once you've confessed your sins, you're ready to be forgiven.

But you can't have one without the other. You can't have John without Jesus. You can't have Christmas without Advent. You can't have Good Friday and Easter without Ash Wednesday and Lent.

Jesus came for sinners only. If you ignore John and say, "I'm not a sinner. I'm doing fine. I don't need anyone to save me." Then Jesus isn't for you.

But if you hear John's word, and the rest of God's law saying, "Love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might, and love your neighbor as yourself," and "be holy as I the Lord am holy." If you hear those words and they crush you, they take the very breath out of your lungs because you realize what a worm you are, then Jesus is for you.

John points you to Jesus. John points to Jesus and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Jesus came for sinners. Jesus loves you. Jesus knows all of your sins, all of your darkest secrets, but he still loves you. He loves you so much that he died for you.

Jesus invites you here to this altar today, to gather with John and all the saints in receiving his forgiveness and his holiness. He gives you his body to eat and his blood to drink, shed on the cross for you.