**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**

**Watertown, WI**

**“To Be Rid of Guilt”**

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Mark 6:14-29: The death of John the Baptist

Herod Antipas, the King, is enjoying himself immensely. His belly is stuffed with the feast. He has just finished his third brandy old fashioned. He has surrounded himself with the elites of the land, his favored generals, advisors, and businessmen of Galilee. They are celebrating his birthday in grand style. The booze is flowing. A few are smoking Cubans; others are throwing dice. The humor is crude, the laughter almost ear-splitting. Into all that testosterone steps his beautiful young stepdaughter, Salome. My, how she’s changed!

She was once Herod’s little niece, the daughter of his brother Herod Philip in Rome who was married to a strong and attractive woman named Herodias. Herod Antipas (our guy in Galilee) became obsessed with his sister-in-law Herodias, and convinces her to divorce Herod Philip and come back to Galilee and be his queen. In turn, to make room for Herodias, Antipas divorces his own wife and throws her out on the streets. And Herodias’ daughter, Salome, came to the royal palace with her mother as part of the package.

Antipas remembers her as a baby. But she’s not a baby any longer. She’s a beautiful young woman, and she’s dancing *for him*. How did she ever learn to dance and flirt and tease like that? In that era, solo dances were normally the art of prostitutes. Herod loves the dance of his former niece and now stepdaughter. He drinks it in with his gawking eyes. And that pretty much tells us all we need to know about him, doesn’t it? If we had any doubts, they disappear with Herod’s next move. He is so pleased by how she moved her body, that he says: “I’ll give you whatever you ask for, up to half my kingdom.” Surely, it’s hyperbole. Surely, she won’t ask for half his kingdom. But it does communicate he wants to give her a gift, something significant.

Herod’s friends can hardly believe their ears. They know of his famous impulsiveness. They know he was even more a fool after he’s had a few. In fact, that’s why they are there; to rub elbows with him and others who are rich and powerful. That’s one way to get ahead. But tonight, Herod is offering that opportunity to the dancer. What would she say? Everyone is listening, and everyone is a little disappointed when she takes some time to think it over.

She goes to her mother and asks what she should do. And her mother knows exactly. Not something so grand as to embarrass her husband and force him to retract his promise. But also, not something insignificant. “Tell him you want the head of John the Baptist.” Dutifully, the girl enters the fool king’s presence and passes on her mother’s request, with her own little flourish. “I want the head of John the Baptist *on a platter*” she says. And of all the times for this king to keep his word, he chooses this time. The Bible says “he was exceedingly sorry” to do this because Herod knew John “was a righteous and holy man.” But a fool king made a foolish oath to a foolish girl in front of all his powerful and ambitious friends, so he “immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head.”

With whom do you identify in this account? It’s kind of hard, right, because it’s a room full of scoundrels. We don’t want to be like any of them. And yet, if honest, we’re a bit like each of them. Have you ever had too much to drink and said stupid things, things that still make you cringe? Have you ever flirted with a married person? Have you ever made foolish promises to others, promises you know you can’t keep, or may not want to? Have you ever done foolish things with the resources God has given you, like wasting them impulsively rather than being patient stewards? Have you partied with the brass at work not because you like them, but because they could advance your career path? Have you ever gone to a place that no Christian should ever go to and gawked as Herod and his friends gawked? Have you ever visited websites on your phone or computer that Christians should never visit, and gazed delightedly? Have you ever turned a blind eye to an injustice, even as no one in that room challenged Herod to repent of putting an innocent man to death? Have you ever done something you knew was wrong (as the executioner did) under the lame excuse that it was your job, your duty, the expectation of your boss, your spouse, your parent? With whom do you identify in this account? Sadly, a bit of each one of these people is in us.

We need to remember why John the Baptist is in Herod’s dungeon. He had dared speak out against wickedness. He had dared tell Herod and Herodias, “How you are living right now is not right, and you need to repent!”

Notice how Mark delicately informs us of the bizarre family dynamics with Herod. It’s almost not fit for polite conversation. But that’s the point. There are things about **our** lives, **our** families and **our** friends that are not fit for polite conversation. This account in the Bible shows just how messed up and mired in sin our lives can become. And if John the Baptist were here, right now, you know what he would say to you and me? “There are things about how you are living right now that are not right! You need to stop that! You need to turn away from that and beg God for His forgiveness.”

John the Baptist called Herod and Herodias to repent of their sin, and Herodias did not like it one little bit. Who was he, this caged, dirty, little dessert prophet to judge her? Who was he to try to question the validity and dignity of her marriage? Who was he to try to make her feel guilty and ashamed? Who was he to try to rob her of the happiness she always deserved? And so, when the moment presents itself, she doesn’t hesitate. “Ask for his head” she tells her daughter. And she does. And it happens.

The mood of that party changed on a dime. I imagine the guests left that night dazed and distressed by the wickedness and hatred they had witnessed from Herod and his family. But not Herodias. No, she’s happy, relieved, and looking forward to the days ahead living finally with her husband without guilt, because John was dead. His voice was silenced. No more sermons from him.

I think you and I might be able to relate to Herodias in this way; certainly not in being part of the palace intrigue or the reason why someone’s life was ended. But the desire to live without guilt is a strong impulse, and sometimes we go about pursuing it in all the wrong ways. We try to take short cuts. Rather than making changes in heart and life and seeking God’s cleansing grace, Herod and Herodias found it easier to put John’s head on a platter.

I wonder if you and I sometimes do that too. No matter who we are, there are times when the Word of the Lord cuts through and interrupts and says “stop, turn, repent!” “This is not right.” “You need to change.” “This cannot continue.” And the hard truth is sometimes we don’t want to change; we’d rather turn our backs on God and not listen to Him. I’m convinced many who have left the Christian faith have done it for this reason. I believe many leave God and His church because they don’t want to live with guilt anymore. Easier to chop off the Word of God’s Law than to deal with the guilt and shame. Easier to choose a new view of sexuality and freedom and identity, a new view that doesn’t challenge my way of living and behaving. Easier to use my time and money to be happy than to serve the Lord and my neighbors. Or sometimes it goes like this, “Easier to work my tail off in the community, in this club or that lodge to make me feel good about myself and worthy and righteous, than to change things about me that need changing, and ask God for His forgiveness.” Easier to lop off the head of John than to repent and ask for forgiveness.

But you know, short-cuts do not work with guilt and shame. Spiritual problems demand spiritual solutions. Guilt and shame require forgiveness, absolution, cleansing, not turning your back on God and His church. They require the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, Herod is long dead, and we don’t owe any allegiance to him. No, our King is the Lord Jesus Christ. He made us, and we are His. To Him belongs everything that makes us who we are, even our sin and shame. And He invites you to dump your sin and shame and guilt on Him. Watch as God nails your guilt to the cross. Watch as He suffers and bleeds for your sin. Watch as He restrains His power and saves you through weakness. You cannot acquire innocence and righteousness any other way. These are gifts that come only through the grace of our Savior Jesus.

So, to all who are struggling to believe, to all who are struggling to confess the historic Christian faith, to all who are thinking about turning their backs on God and His church because of sin and shame, to all of us comes this encouragement from God’s Word. When our King welcomes you to the feast, it is not a feast you will leave with deep regret and shame and complicity in sin, as Herod’s guests left the feast that night. The feast served here is where regret and shame and sin are washed away. You won’t wake up the following morning with memories of things you wish you could unsee. You will wake up cleansed, refreshed, to a new day of grace.

Short-cuts don’t work with sin. You don’t live without guilt by turning your back on God and His law and running away. You live without guilt by staying close to Jesus, under His reign, in His Kingdom, according to His Word, the reign of the one who purchased your seat at the table with His own blood. Amen.