11 July 2021 Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Pentecost 7 Vienna, VA

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"Welcome Home!"
Text: Mark 6:14-29; Amos 7:7-15; Ephesians 1:3-14
Introit: Psalm 143:11; Gradual: Romans 11:33

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

It was dark when he woke up. It usually was. There were no windows, just bars and chains. Sometimes he tried to go back to sleep, but it was usually useless. The vermin were up, too, and would keep him awake. Was it day or night? He could hear some of the other prisoners - that usually meant it was day time. But who really knew.

It was a strange existence for him. How long had he been here? He lost track of time. The food wasn't much, but neither was it in the days he ate locusts and wild honey! He longed for his days in the Jordan, baptizing. Those were good days. The crowds, the preaching, the baptizing, the joy of forgiveness. The day he baptized Jesus! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That seemed like a lifetime ago now. It <u>*was*</u> a lifetime ago. But he knew: Jesus must increase, and he must decrease (John 3:30). But he never thought he'd decrease <u>*this*</u> much. To one of Herod's dungeons.

Some of his own disciples wondered why God was treating him like this, and whether Jesus really was the Messiah or not (Matthew 11:3). But he knew he wasn't the first, and he wouldn't be the last. God's prophets were often mistreated. He remembered Jeremiah and all he went through. He'd been cast into a pit and feared for his life. Isaiah had been sawn in two. Moses - how did he put up with the Israelites all those years? All their complaining and rebellion. Even Amos. He ***was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the Lord took [him] from following the flock, and the Lord said to [him], 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'*** He did. And they rejected him, too.

Prophets had a tough life. But not just prophets - *any* Christian who speaks the Word of God in truth can expect pushback . . . and maybe more.

But maybe he would be set free soon. And <u>not</u> to go back to the Jordan. Not that kind of free. But really free. Truly free. Free from this world and its sin. The freedom death would bring him, to go to eternal life. That would be the day! Maybe today?

He heard guards coming . . . he actually liked that. For often they would come for him

and take him out to preach to King Herod. It always took his eyes a while to adjust to light again! But they did. And he always appreciated what he saw more than he had before. It had all been so common before - the flowers, trees, bees, and animals. The sun! Other people. Not anymore. He would never take them for granted again - if he ever got out of here. It was such a treat to see them again! So guards coming . . . that got up his hope . . .

For then he would get to preach again, too. That was his calling, his vocation, after all. To be the forerunner of the Messiah. To preach for Him. To preach Him. To call sinners to repentance and baptize them for the forgiveness of sins. Why had *he* been selected to do that? He didn't know. But he knew it was by grace, as all your vocations are. He didn't deserve such a high calling. Others could surely have done it better than him. And look at him now! In prison! But this, too, part of God's plan. God's mysterious, unfathomable plan. ***Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*** How true.

So when he heard the guards, he hoped he would get to preach again. To King Herod. It was strange how King Herod kept bringing him back. For he kept telling him how it was not right for him to have married ***Herodias, his brother Philip's wife***. Herod's face always got kind of red when he said that - and he said it everytime he got to preach to him! And while Herod would never repent, he kept bringing him back. ***He heard him gladly***. He thought he knew why. Because when you're the king, everyone kisses your . . . well, your *you know what*. They all tell you what you want to hear. No one talks straight. No one will tell you what you really *need* to hear. That must get old pretty quick. Maybe you know a little of that.

But *he* wasn't like that. True prophets aren't like that. Men called to be preachers aren't to be like that. He called a spade a spade. He called sinners sinners. And Herod was a sinner! A great one! And he wasn't afraid to tell him so. And speaking of the prophet Amos and his plumb line - he liked that image; would use that line sometimes. Tell Herod how he was not straight at all, but way off! For what could Herod do to him, after all? Kill him? Then he would be free. Then he wouldn't have to go back to the darkness - he would be in the light. The everlasting light. That would be the day. He longed for that day.

So Herod ***heard him gladly***. And he liked preaching - not just calling Herod to repentance, but especially telling him of Jesus. That while yes, he was a great sinner, he also had a great Saviour! One who was now here! The one upon whom the Spirit had descended when he, John himself, baptized Him, when the voice came from heaven: *This is my beloved son!* (Matthew 3:17) Yes, God's Son was here for sinners, for *all* sinners, for all *people, for Herod*. There was hope.

Herod was always intrigued. He even said one time how he wished to see Jesus and see

him perform some miracle (Luke 23:8) - maybe then he would believe. But that wasn't John's responsibility. He was just to preach - it was up to the Spirit to do the rest.

Then he heard the guards again - they shook him from his thoughts back to reality. Get up! they said to him. Then he felt the boot in his ribs, and the laugh. How they liked tormenting the prisoners. Like living in this hell hole wasn't enough. He got up. They unlocked his chains and led him out. It was time to see Herod. It was time to preach.

Except . . . *it wasn't*. Everytime he went to see Herod they turned to the right out of his cell. Today they turned left. Strange. They went down a corridor; it didn't take long. Before he knew it, he felt a shove in his back. It knocked him off balance, and as his knees hit the floor and he felt waves of pain bolt through his legs, he then felt his stomach - and then his chest - hit a block of stone. And then . . .

Well done, good and faithful servant (Matthew 25:21). Welcome home!

He heard the words. He opened his eyes. It was light. And warm. There were the prophets he'd just been thinking about - Jeremiah, Isaiah, Moses, and Amos. The life he preached he was now *in*. What had happened?

He didn't know. *We* know. Creepy Herod made a creepy oath to his creepy neice who he drunkenly lusted after when she danced for him at his party - and she asked for ***the head of John the Baptist on a platter***. He didn't want to do it. But he couldn't prefer John to his niece. He was afraid of what his guests would think. He didn't have the hope of eternal life - *this* life was all he had. He didn't have a Saviour, so *this* life he had to save. So he did. He gave the order, and it was carried out, swiftly and efficiently. John would never preach again.

Except he would. He still does. To us. Through the Word he is still speaking to us today, calling us to repentance, to the forgiveness of sins, and to the promise of everlasting life. He is preaching to us to fear no Herod - even if they don't listen to us; even if they throw us in prison. And to repent if we do. For all any Herod can do is kill us - but they can't take our life. All they can do is do us a favor, to send us from this world of sin and death to our eternal life. From the darkness to the light. From prison to freedom.

And then we'll be with Jeremiah, Isaiah, Moses, Amos . . . *and John*. Because He who promised is faithful. Jesus is faithful. He promised us life and died to fulfill that promise. He promised us forgiveness and atoned for our sins through His death on the cross. He promised us sonship and makes us sons of God in baptism. John's baptism was great, but His even greater. And so like John, though life may be tough - really tough, *dungeon* tough! - we are *never* hopeless. We are never hopeless with Christ.

And one day, just as John's headless body will rise, so will yours. Whole, complete,

perfect, and glorious. Because Jesus rose. And baptized into His death, you are also baptized into His resurrection (Romans 6).

So what Herods do you have in your life? What troubles? What problems? What people who will not listen? Who are against you? Who threaten you? Do not fear and do not despair. Your Lord is greater than all. As we sang in the Introit, He will bring your ***soul out of trouble*** and ***preserve your life***. As Paul told us, in Him you have ***an inheritance*** in heaven, you ***were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of your inheritance***. So you have confidence. In Him. In His blood. In His life.

So come and receive His blood, His body, and His life. Come receive the forgiveness of your sins. Come receive and know that - like John - there is nothing in all creation that can now separate you from His love (Romans 8:39). For John was great, but even the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he (Matthew 11:11b). And you're in that kingdom. His kingdom of grace, here, until you enter His kingdom of glory.

So whatever you are going through, whatever doubts and fears you have, whatever challenges, hardships, or troubles, whatever threatening kings or horrible dungeons, the Lord knows, and sees, and has you. Life in this sinful world is never going to be easy, but it is not hopeless either. Your Lord has come to save. Your Lord is <u>here</u> to save. And He is coming again to save. <u>You</u>. For in your baptism, the same words spoken to Him He says to you. And when you calls you home, like John, you'll hear them again: *You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter, with you I am well pleased. Well done, good and faithful servant. Welcome home!*

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.