

Text: Mark 6:14-29
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Grace and Peace be unto you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Many people are aware that Martin Luther was a great theologian, however many people do not realize that Martin Luther was also an accomplished hymn writer. One of Luther's most famous hymns is A Mighty Fortress Is Our God. Of course this hymn is a Lutheran favourite that we dust off and sing fairly regularly. But I wonder how many people have ever stopped and really thought about the words that they were singing with such happy hearts?

Consider with me that final stanza of A Mighty Fortress is Our God: The Word they still shall let remain Nor any thanks have for it; He's by our side upon the plain With his good gifts and Spirit. And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Though these all be gone, Our victory has been won; The Kingdom ours remaineth.

Yes! Yes! Kill me, steal from me, dishonor my name, take my children, take my wife- but not to worry all is good because the kingdom of God is mine! Somehow I doubt that would be our response considering if you ask people to stay for more than 90 minutes of worship, one is bound to hear complaints.

Whatever the reasons, we don't really like it when our faith challenges us by calling us out of our comfort zones. Not to mention sacrifice...

I think that we all know that an active, living, breathing faith is not meant to be a pacifier. Doubt me? Consider the lives and ministry of Christ, St. Paul, St. Peter, Luther and Mother Theresa for example.

Our God given faith can be said to be invigorating, forgiving, strengthening, motivating, etc., but it can not be called pacifying or comfortable.

Today in our gospel lesson we find the name of a man who lived with a powerful and challenging faith: John the Baptizer.

Now John the Baptist is probably someone whom needs no introduction. I am sure that many of us can picture John on the banks of the River Jordan wearing nothing more than ratty sack cloth fashioned with a large leather belt, locusts and honey dripping down his beard while shouting at the crowds and Pharisees whom have come to see him, "REPENT! REPENT! For The Kingdom of God is Near!"

No doubt about it, John was a colorful and dramatic person...and in death things did not change.

John the Baptist found himself in jail because he spoke out loudly and prophetically against Herod The Tetrarch's marriage to his niece/step brother's wife (it was a rather confusing and incestuous marriage!). John, who was not one to hold his tongue, criticized Herod and Herodias' (Herod's new wife) marriage.

Now, Herodias did not like John criticizing her and making her sin apparent (who does?). So we are told that she persuaded her husband, Herod, to "deal" with John.

However, we are told that Herod feared John because he recognized that he "was of God"- so for the time being, Herod appeared content to let John stew in prison. The Bible even hints that Herod may have actually respected and liked John. (Mk 6:20) But it is obvious that Herodias had no love for him.

And it is at this point in the story of Herod and John the Baptist that we learn the value of not making "blind promises".

For one evening Herod hosted an intoxicating party for his friends and family. At this affair, Herod's step-daughter Salome (Herodias' daughter from her first marriage) danced a "pleasing" dance. Herod was so impressed that he confidently said to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half my kingdom." (Mk 6:23)

At this point, Salome goes out and talks with her mother. She says, "Mom what should I ask for?" And Herodias, taking this opportunity to get rid of that thorn in her side which is John the Baptist, says, "The Head of John the Baptizer." (Mk

6:24) So, Salome goes back in and tells her step father that she wants the head of John the Baptist on a platter- immediately.

And since a good king must keep his promises (even if they are bad ones), Herod has his guards behead John the Baptist. John's head is brought on a platter and presented to Salome. (Mk 6:28)

Ultimately, John's conviction to his prophetic calling led to his death. For us, as people of faith, who struggle to live out our callings in the world, the stories about the deaths of John and Jesus remind and warn us that God does not always reward faithful discipleship with an easy life. The faithful or prophetic Christian might find herself beheaded- crucified- thrown to the lions- fired from a job- at conflict with a loved one- etc....

It is interesting to note where Mark places the story of the beheading of John the Baptist into his text...Mark places this gruesome story of torture right after Christ sends out his 12 apostles to evangelize and preach God's Word. It is as if Mark is telling us that evangelism and faithfulness comes with a price.

Consider Christ's own words, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." (Mk 8:34-35)

Blessedly, we presently live in a country in which we can gather together without fear of reprisal, torture or death. Unfortunately there are many places in the world where this is not the case.

Nevertheless, we are still called to sacrifice for the gospel: stand up to evil where we see it, give of ourselves to help others, share with others the good news of God- even if it may make us "unpopular" in some circles.

Our faith is intended to call us to action- love, repentance, service...Our experience with God is not meant to be like Herod's. Notice that even though Herod knew that John was of God, he still jails and kills him because he wants to impress his wife and friends.

As the Old Testament reminds us, ours is a "jealous" God. He wants to be at the centre of our lives. He wants to inform our decisions with his Holy Word. God does not want to be pushed out to the margins of our lives.

God hasn't promised us that our lives will be easy. He hasn't promised us that our faith will steer us away from danger and suffering. But what God has promised to us has no match on earth: salvation and eternal life.

No matter what storms may rage around us, no matter what ills may befall us- God has promised to be present for us and deliver us.

I am willing to lose my life to gain that!

Amen