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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10B)

July 12, 2015

Text: Mark 6:14–29

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Zombie business is staggeringly successful these days. They used to come out only on Halloween but now they're mainstream. *Monster High*, a line of Zombie dolls, games, and clothing accessories, makes the living dead fashionable and cool. Past slogans include, "Freaky just got fabulous." The 2013 slogan was "Where screams come true." The current motto is "Be yourself. Be Unique. Be a Monster." Brad Pitt took zombies to the big screen in 2012 with *World War Z* which grossed over \$540 million in ticket sales.

We human beings throughout the ages have been curiously fascinated with death. It's both mysterious and frightening. Science and common human experience tell us the mechanics of death. The body simply stops working. The organs shut down. The body goes absolutely unresponsive.

But then, there's that mysterious side of things. Is there nothing more after Death? Can the body be made alive again? Wonder and curiosity abound. For centuries, people have imagined the dead coming back to life through the use of extraordinary powers. Zombies, the living dead, originated in cultures heavily influenced by voodoo. Western cultures, including ours, are influenced by the Greek and Roman myths surrounding Persephone, the goddess of the underworld who is released from the doom of Hades in the spring only to return to death in the fall. The hope underlying all these stories and myths, both ancient and modern, is that Death is not the end.

Today's gospel reading demonstrates that the Jews of the 1st century certainly believed that death wasn't the end. According to vs. 14, many were saying that John the Baptist had been raised from the dead in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (vs. 14). That's where His extraordinary power to perform miracles came from; He's John raised from the dead!

Herod Antipas, son of the infamous Herod the Great, certainly believed that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead (vs. 16). Such a thought couldn't have been very

comforting to him. Herod had John beheaded as a result of a foolish promise made during a debased, drunken feast (vs. 22–28). People with a guilty conscience will often do and think strange things.

Herod's guilty conscience really began before John entered the picture. Vs. 17 describes the scandalous love affair between Herod and Herodias which led to an even more scandalous marriage. Herodias was married to Herod's brother, Philip. Tradition records that Herod seduced Herodias, convinced her to divorce Philip and marry him. Herod seduced his brother's wife and married her in view of all the world.

John the Baptist, that fiery desert preacher of repentance, would not countenance such an incestuous affair. "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife" (vs. 18). John does what all faithful prophets and preachers of God must do: proclaim God's unrelenting Law in all its force and severity regardless of the position, power, and influence of the person. Like Nathan, that famous prophet of old who looked David, the most powerful king of Israel, in the face and declared, "You are the man who deserves to die for committing adultery only to murder the woman's husband to cover the sin," so John declares the stench such actions were before the Lord God.

Repent, O man, O woman, O child! It's not lawful for you to have other gods, misuse the Lord's name, despise His Word and Sacraments, dishonor parents and other authorities, murder your neighbor with hatred and envy, lust after sexual intimacy with someone not given to you by God as husband or wife, steal by taking what isn't yours or by not giving what you rightfully owe, destroying your neighbor's good name and reputation under the pious pretense of "speaking the truth", or desiring anything or anyone the Lord hasn't give to you. The Law speaks loudly even to you Christians. "It is not lawful..."

A guilty conscience arises from thoughts, words, and deeds which violate God's Law. Herod knew his sin with Herodias. And he also knew John "was a righteous and holy man" (vs. 20). Herod's conflicted, guilty conscience led him to follow the murderous madness of his wife's rage in having John imprisoned (vs. 17). But Herod also protected him and even gladly heard him (vs. 20). Odd, don't you think? Herod gladly hears the man he wrongfully imprisons, the very same man telling him that living and eating and sleeping with Herodias is an offense to God.

Have you noticed that when you're struggling with a particular sin that the Church and her pastors become attractive and repelling, at the same time? The man or woman

with the guilty conscience says, “How does he know about my sin? He’s preaching to me! Who does he think he is to single me out from everyone else?!” It’s true, Christians will sometimes quit coming to hear God’s Word and to receive Christ’s body and blood when their conscience tells them they are violating God’s Law. And yet, so often they will be the first to defend the Church when outsiders speak ill of it. They love the Church, her pastors and members, but refuse to join them regularly and joyfully. It’s a zombie-like existence, not quite dead to the things of God but neither living in them as God desires for us.

It doesn’t make sense. But then again, sin is a maddening violation of what is good, true, and beautiful. Sin seldom makes sense. It’s not without reason that the apostle Paul laments his sinful condition in Rom 7:22–24, “For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Within the same man, faith and unbelief, the desire for sin and the desire for righteousness.

Who will deliver us from the living death of a guilty conscience? The same Man whom Herod thought was John the Baptist returned from the dead, Jesus, the miracle worker from Nazareth. Through baptismal connection to Jesus you are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. No longer are you walking in the futility of a sinful mind that is neither alive to God nor at home in this fallen world. You have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation (Eph 1:13). In Jesus, you are made new and alive again. Peace with God and man is restored.

The tragic death of John the Baptist powerfully and prophetically proclaims the mission and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. The disgust we feel over Herod and Herodias’ scandalous and incestuous marriage should serve as a warning for us. Sin is corrosive, not just sexual sin, but any and every manifestation of violation of God’s good and holy Law. We must not allow ourselves the luxury of thinking that such sordid sins happen to others. Within each of us is a world of sins. And the Lord Jesus came to save us from them through His life, death, and resurrection. Daily we pray “Thy will be done” in the hope and confidence that God our Father “breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God’s name or let His kingdom come...” (Small Catechism, 3rd Petition).

The death that John suffers was prophecy in action, pointing to Jesus' pending death. Our Lord would not die under the order of Herod, though he was complicit (Lk 23:6–16). He died under a different government official, Pontius Pilate who likewise declared his victim innocent and righteous, only to cower under the pressure of others. The disciples of John took the body of their martyred master “and laid it in a tomb” (vs. 29). Joseph of Arimathea, a fearful disciple of Jesus, would take the Lord's crucified body from Pilate and lay Him in a tomb. John lived and died in prophecy to the mission and ministry of Jesus.

The joyous difference between the prophecy, John the Baptist, and the prophecy's fulfillment, the Lord Jesus, is that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day in order to destroy the power of death and the devil (Heb 2:14), to give us justification unto eternal life (Rom 4:25), and to wash our conscience clean (Heb 10:22). Our dear Lord is not part of the living dead which so many in our world are fascinated with; He is Death's living conqueror. Because Jesus lives, you live, pure, clean, holy in the sight God's heavenly host. Connected to the Lord's death in baptism, you are likewise living recipients of His resurrection life.

Death is not the end. The stain of sin and a guilty conscience are never permanent. The Lord Jesus lives and reigns to all eternity in order to give you His undying life. Live well, dear saints, in the joy and peace of Jesus' victory. Christ is risen from the dead!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.