

SERMON THEME: JOHN HAS RISEN FROM THE DEAD, AND SO WILL YOU!

Dear friends, as we celebrate the feast of the martyrdom of John the Baptist, we notice King Herod couldn't have been more wrong in his life. But, can you blame him? News had come to him that a new man was going through the countryside doing mighty works: healing the sick, raising the dead, and preaching about the kingdom of God. Now Herod didn't know who this man was; he didn't know Jesus. The only man he knew who did this kind of thing was John, whom we call the Baptist. But John was dead. Wasn't he? Herod had him killed! So can we blame Herod for this misstatement, that John had been raised from the dead? Yet, as wrong as this statement was, it couldn't have been more right! John the Baptist had been killed and he surely wasn't the individual walking and talking about the kingdom of God. But Herod was right about this:

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King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, **“John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.”** (Mark 6:14) Beloved in Christ, it's no surprise that King Herod heard of it; it being, Jesus' miracles and preaching. It was for this reason that John had been born. It was for this reason that John had come, to **“prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”** (Isaiah 40:3) John was the forerunner of the Messiah, the Herald of Heaven who faithfully proclaimed the day of the Lord. So forceful was John's preaching that some even believed he was the one who was to come; this was not so. John was not the one who was to come, but the one who would come before Him, to prepare the hearts and minds of the people to receive God Himself.

Dear friends, we praise God that John was not the one; that John was not the Messiah. Despite Jesus' own words of praise, **“I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John.”** (Luke 7:28) John the Baptist was still a sinner. John knew this, and so with great humility he accomplished his task, pointing not to himself, but to the Messiah! John's unending cry was this, **I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. (John 3:28)...“he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.”** (Matt 3:11) John's message to the people of his day and ours is, “do not look to me, but to the Christ, the Lamb of God who bears the sins of the world.” With straightened finger, John joyfully points to the Messiah in bold proclamation that Jesus has come among His people to take upon Himself your sins and your shame, and to bear them to the cross that they maybe crucified with him and be remembered no more!

But John didn't just simply point to the Lord and say “there He is,” for John is the forerunner of Christ and His herald. John rightly said of Jesus **“He must increase, but I must decrease.”** (John 3:30) John pointed his followers (and us) to the Christ another way. Thus, John could joyfully say, **“this joy of mine is now complete,”** (John 3:29) and send his own disciples to Jesus to ask, **“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”** (Matthew 11:3) I dare say that we can sympathize with this question. There are times in our lives where illness in ourselves or others, financial troubles, or emotional pain can cause us to ask this same question. Like John, we too are sinners, susceptible to the same sinful doubts and deeds of John and his disciples. But John's message to his disciples and to you is the same, **“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”** (John 1:29)

It was for this message, really, that John was killed. Sure, Herodias (Herod's wife) was angry that John had been condemning her illegitimate marriage. Sure, Herod had been looking for a way to kill him. But all of this is just window dressing. John really died on account of Christ. Remember, John was the forerunner of the Messiah, sent by God to proclaim the kingdom. In doing so, John decried the wayward ways of a wanton woman; a woman who denied the Christ and sought vengeance on the messenger of the messiah. In his arrest and imprisonment, John continued to point to the Christ, who also, because of His message of Good News and His promise of peace, was arrested unjustly and executed for crimes He didn't commit.

Even in John's death, he was still the herald of Christ. Even if it weren't Herodias' desire to behead the herald of the Messiah, John would still have died. Once again, John was a sinner, just like you and me. Because of that sin, even he—about whom Jesus said **“I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John.”** (Luke 7:28)—was destined to die for his sin. Whether by sword or age, John was condemned to die, as are all who have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. John's death points us to an even greater death: that of Jesus; for Jesus did die on a cross for sins that were not His, but which He willingly took upon Himself at His baptism. In His death, Jesus not only paid for the sins of the whole world, but also for John's sins and for yours as well!

In death, as in life, John pointed to the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lamb who took away the sins of the world, for that is what John was sent to do. St. Mark writes that **“King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known.” (Mark 6:14)** The “it” of which Herod had heard were Jesus’ miracles, His healings, and His teachings. These things might have easily passed Herod’s notice if they weren’t so similar to John’s own proclamation, as easily as they pass the notice of our world today.

Dear friends, we celebrate today, John the Baptist, God’s servant, not for John’s sake, but because **JOHN HAS RISEN FROM THE DEAD, AND SO WILL YOU!**

Just as John was Jesus’ forerunner in his ministry and his death, so also is John our forerunner into life. John the Baptist baptized people for the repentance of sins on the banks of the Jordan River. But who baptized John? We hear that when Jesus came to be baptized by John, John tried to prevent Him, saying, **“it is I who needs to be baptized by you!” (Matt 3:14)** But there is no record of John’s water baptism by Jesus. Yet John was baptized! Whether or not John was baptized with water; this much we know for certain: John was baptized in blood! John, in his death, was baptized into Christ’s death, and now John the Baptist stands at the throne of God having been given **“a white robe and told to rest a little longer.” (Rev 6:11)**

John’s baptism took place in a simple jail cell, because of sin. We know, with St. Paul, that **“the wages of sin is death.” (Rom 6:23)** Once again, we who are sinful recognize that our sinful condition has earned us the same condemnation as St. John; and yet, John is our forerunner into life! St. Paul also says, **“the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus.” (Rom 6:23)** This gift has been purchased by our savior, not with gold or silver, but with the innocent suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. Just as John and all the other martyrs **“who have been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne” (Rev 6:9)** have received the promise of eternal life, so shall all who believe on Christ’s name, for **JOHN HAS RISEN FROM THE DEAD, AND SO WILL YOU!**

Now, I believe that none of us has had the joy of martyrdom for the sake of Jesus, although some of us may have come close in our lives. Notice, then, that resurrection and eternal life are not limited to those who have been baptized in blood, but for all who believe in Christ. St. Paul tells us in Romans, **“do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:3&4)** For our loved ones who have believed without the benefit of baptism, Christ’s atoning sacrifice has also washed them clean from sin. For those of us who have been baptized in the waters of Holy Baptism, we rejoice that we have been cleansed by Christ’s blood and sealed into God’s holy family.

Again, St. Paul reminds us that our baptism is a baptism into Christ’s death. Because of this, we have no need to fear. We need not fear illness, financial woes, emotional pain, nor martyrdom, for we have, in Christ, already died. **“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Cor 15:55)** Now baptized in Christ, we can walk in newness of life; life here among our fellow believers, but more so, life in heaven with the body of Christ!

Dear friends, we know this with great certainty. The gospel writers all proclaim the truth of this in their accounts of the resurrection. Jesus the Christ, the son of the living God, who took away all sin where it was crucified with Him on the cross, lay in the tomb for three days. This is a trustworthy saying, worthy of all acceptance. But our Heavenly Father and the gospel writers did not end the story there! Each of the Gospels records the resurrection of the Savior, and with great joy do we receive this, for as St. Paul says, **“if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.” (1 Cor 15:14)** But, in fact, **“Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” (1 Cor 15:20)**

So it is that all who are in Christ—baptized or unbaptized, martyr or missionary, pastor or parishioner—are raised up from the dead with Christ. You can see why I would say that John the Baptist is our forerunner into life, just as he was Jesus’ forerunner into death. This festival Sunday is not so much about the messenger, but about the Messiah who bore our sins into death and bears our souls into life!

Dear friends, King Herod couldn’t have been more wrong in his life. The man going through the countryside doing mighty works—healing the sick, raising the dead, and preaching about the kingdom of God—was not John the Baptist, but the one to whom John pointed, Jesus the Messiah. It is because of Jesus that Herod’s mis-statement was so right, for **JOHN HAS RISEN FROM THE DEAD, AND SO WILL YOU!**