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*We read as follows in Jesus' name:*

For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. ...

And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head.... (ESV)

*This is Your Word, heavenly Father; sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen. (John 17:17)*

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In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ,

What was John expecting was going to happen?

When you play with "**that fox**," you're going to get bit. Luke 13:32

I am sure that many of St. John's friends and disciples told him to cool it.

I wouldn't even doubt if some of those people who didn't like him so much even warned him about the consequences of reprimanding Herod Antipas.

Perhaps he had even gotten threats from Herod's house, and Herod could be rather ruthless.

But John just kept at it, **saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."**

You see, Herod had married Herodias, his (half-)brother Phillip's ex-wife, which was against the Mosaic law (Leviticus 18:16 & 20:21).

Now, in today's political and social climate, one might think

that St. John was simply attacking Herod Antipas because he didn't like his politics and reign.

But consider what John was actually imprisoned for;

of all the things that John could have been reprimanding Herod for,

a divorce and re-marriage don't seem like the most heinous of offenses.

And yet, that is the reason St. Mark gives for Herod seizing John.

...

As a preacher of repentance, John's calling from the Lord was to turn hearts to God.

Now, it could be true that John simply preached against this sin because God told him to, and he was just "checking it off the list."

But I see in John's continued reproaching of Herod

a preacher who genuinely loved his neighbor and desired Herod's true repentance.

He wanted for Herod to confess his sin and unburden his conscience,

to be comforted with the forgiveness that the Lamb of God would die to earn for him,

and that he would amend his sinful life so that Herod could live with a clean conscience before God.

Zacharias, his father, had prophesied John's role in the Benedictus that we will sing in a few moments.

John's calling was "*to give knowledge of salvation unto His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God... to give light to them that sin in the darkness and in the shadow of death: to guide our feet into the way of peace.*"<sup>Luke1:77-79</sup>

But this repentant outcome was certainly not desired by all parties.

Herodias' response was that she **had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death.**

In Herodias, we see the response of a broken conscience.

It was seared so that it was hardened on the outside, and yet very, very tender on the inside, which made her very insecure.

Just like cutting a slice into a well-seared piece of meat, and the juice comes rushing out, so we see when someone reacts so violently to being justifiably reproached.

She desired to murder St. John in order to get back to ignoring her conscience.

She did not want to know about her sin, acknowledge it, repent of it, be forgiven it, nor amend it.

Thus she was heartless, cold, and calculating as we hear Scripture report Herod's oath as "**an opportunity**" for her.

But we see something a little different in Herod's response.

In Herod we see a functioning conscience,

a conscience that was bad and recognized its guilt, but was **perplexed** and didn't know how to fix it.

St. Mark tells us, **for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe.**

**When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.**

This is also one of the reasons that I hear in John's preaching to Herod the genuine desire for repentance.

No one **gladly** continues to hear someone who hates him or speaks heartlessly to him.

No one keeps a guy **safe** from his own wife, if he is afraid of him.

Instead, considering St. John to be **a righteous and holy man**, Herod respected him, at least to a point.

But all that got thrown out the window very quickly when Herod made a very foolish oath.

Against his conscience, Herod ordered St. John's execution.

St. Mark reports that **the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her.**

As absurd as it sounds, Herod thought it better to murder St. John than to break his foolish oath.

This decision haunted Herod, at least for a time, because when he had heard about Jesus' miracles, again, **Herod was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead.**

He at least considered that it might be true and feared the potential punishment of a vengeful miracle worker.

...

Dear Fellow Redeemed, It is a dangerous thing to go against one's conscience.

St. Paul speaks of this as **defiling** one's conscience, in the sense that it is then unclean. <sup>1Corinthians8:7</sup>

Or of wounding one's conscience and hurting one's relationship with God.

This teaching is very important because the conscience is the sinner's path to looking for his Savior.

The sinner whose conscience does not afflict him, does not recognize his need for Jesus.

So to have a conscience that is seared, rejects and hates not only the messenger, but even the Savior.  
And to live with a guilty, defiled, or wounded conscience is not healthy either  
because such a conscience, if kept this way, can be led to despair of one's salvation.

We also see the importance of having a conscience that is properly informed by God's Word,  
as Herod chose murder over the "dishonor" of going back on his word.

Our consciences are informed by many different sources... not all of them good, right, or salutary.  
Growing up in Herod the Great's palace where his father had 10 wives during his lifetime  
and even had a few of his own sons and a wife murdered, accusing them of conspiring against him,  
one could see where Herod Antipas and Herodias would think little of divorcing their spouses  
and getting married and then killing St. John for seeking their repentance.  
And so our consciences are often informed by our family, peers, society, and government,  
for better or for worse.

This is why St. Paul warns that "**Bad company ruins good morals.**"<sup>1Corinthians15:33</sup>  
But a conscience that is properly formed and properly tender  
is one that knows the 10 Commandments and the law of love and freely repents of its transgressions.  
The properly formed conscience is also the one that knows the content of the Creed  
and recognizes that the Triune God through the salvation won by Christ has redeemed and forgiven it.

And this is the conscience that we see in St. John.

He could have kept quiet about Herod's unlawful marriage and probably lived a little longer.

But St. John knew his duty and he knew that it was good and right in God's eyes,  
even though he knew that it would get him in trouble.

So St. John preached to Herod and continued to call him to repentance.

St. John preached with a clean conscience, not because he was perfect, but because he knew Jesus.

While he was in prison, he wanted to confirm and strengthen his faith in the Lamb of God,  
and so he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask if He were the Coming One, the Messiah.

Jesus confirmed it, not by performing miracles for them, but by pointing John to the Scriptures,  
recognizing that Jesus was fulfilling the prophecies.

Dear fellow Redeemed,

Today, we still see Herods, Herodias, and St. Johns.

In only the last few weeks, our news outlets have been filled with the violence in Afghanistan,  
as men with broken and misinformed consciences, seek to save and redeem their souls  
by torturing and murdering their non-Muslim neighbors.

Among those being massacred and murdered are those in the underground Christian Church.

And yet, these Christian brothers and sisters, like St. John, are not willing to give up their testimony.

They are not willing to give up their Savior as they continue to meet together around His Word,  
knowing full well that by doing so, they may very well end up like St. John.

In such trying times, do you suppose that their consciences are being tried at every turn?

In consideration of a very real threat of death, do you suppose that they, like any of us would,  
begin to fear death more than their Savior,

and might consider it not prudent to join together for the Divine Service.

Do you suppose that they might begin to doubt if what they believe in is real.

Is there really life after this earthly death?

Such fears and doubts defile our conscience and burden and wound our souls.

But God provides the answer to defiled, burdened, and wounded consciences,  
in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Like St. John you can go to Jesus to hear Him give, confirm, and seal His forgiveness to you.

You do this through the ministry of Word and Sacrament, most easily seen in the Divine Service.

Here you confess your sins and they are absolved, forgiven in Jesus' name.

Here Christ is presented to you as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,  
and the blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses your conscience from all sin.

Here you receive the Lord's body and blood to confirm unto you the forgiveness  
of all your fears, and doubts, and sins.

And being thus unburdened, you are strengthened in and by Christ to face the various temptations  
to come your way this week.

You need not fear the Herods or Herodias of the world.

In love and compassion you may make a bold confession of your Savior for their repentance.

You need not doubt God's grace and goodness for Christ is with you at all times, even the scary ones.

And thus, whether you live or you die this week, He has given you a clean conscience  
with which you stand before God as pure and holy in His righteousness.

*Soli Deo Gloria*