

SERMON FOR SUN. JULY 11 AND WED. JULY 14, 2021

Pent 7B 2021 Mark 6:14-29 The Telltale Conscience.”

Dear fellow redeemed of the Lord Jesus Christ, Edgar Allen Poe wrote a scary story called “*The Telltale Heart.*” In it, Poe tells the saga of a man who murdered someone then hid the victim’s body beneath the floorboards of his house.

Late that night, the guilt of what he’d done bothered him so much that he started hearing a faint, then louder heartbeat. He became convinced that the heartbeat belonged to the man he killed, and everyone in the room (including the detective investigating the man’s disappearance) could hear it too.

As it turns out, the heartbeat he hears is his own, amplified by the blood rushing through his ears, as his rapid heartbeat and high blood pressure betrayed the stress and anxiety he felt.

In the end, he’s forced to confess that he’d killed the missing man. The guilt of what he’d done, taking the shape of a mysterious heartbeat, drove him crazy.

I told you this story because the man’s experience in Poe’s tale mirrors that of King Herod Antipas in today’s Gospel lesson.

Though Herod had imprisoned John the Baptist, he hesitated to hurt John, for he knew John was a true prophet. Unlike many of his countrymen, Herod had actually listened to John.

He knew that the word of Law John had spoken to him about marrying his brother’s wife was just. He perhaps envied John for so many of Herod’s subjects were going out to be baptized. And though he may have been jealous, he knew that his guilt would only increase if he added killing John to his long list of sins.

So when reports of Jesus’ ministry reached him, and he heard how even his disciples were calling people to repentance and performing miracles on the missionary journey, he declared, “**John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.**”

Herod may have been hesitant to harm John, Yet, in today’s text Mark tells us that Herod threw himself a birthday party one day.

Maybe he was drunk, we can't know for sure, but when he saw his stepdaughter dancing in an unchaste manner before he and his officials, he rashly promised to give her anything she asked for.

When his wife convinced her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist, he couldn't very well renege on the promise he'd made before so many important officials, so perhaps reluctantly, he had John beheaded.

Now, though, his guilt was convicting him. He may not have heard the beating of a telltale heart, but he did have a telltale conscience.

So when he heard the news of Jesus' preaching and miracles, his guilt ridden mind concluded that John had risen from the dead, returning to condemn him anew. **Pause**

It's easy to look a story like this one and simply see Herod as the bad guy. Not to say that he was a real peach. You definitely wouldn't want to be on his bad side.

This is, after all, the same man who mocked Jesus and allowed his soldiers to flog and ridicule the Lord of Life on Good Friday. His father, Herod the Great, after the reports of the Magi, ordered all baby boys under the age of 2 in the area of Bethlehem killed in an effort to assassinate the newborn King of the Jews.

So, Herod is definitely no goody two shoes. But he did have a telltale conscience, a remnant of faith that realized he'd one day have to answer to someone far more powerful than Caesar.

Herod was a bad dude, but what about you? Do you have a telltale conscience? If so, what tales would it tell if it could talk? If they are anything like mine, we certainly wouldn't want the stuff that is plaguing our conscience published in a novel.

As we recall the wrongs we've committed against our neighbors, particularly against our fellow Christians, we begin to realize that we're just as foolish, cruel, and self-serving as Herod.

We may not have literally had someone murdered, but we've made plenty of rash statements we later came to regret, many of which may have led to their reputation being harmed.

We've probably looked at our neighbor and thought that he or she was "such a fool." Their foolishness alternately made you angry or perhaps you just rolled your eyes at them.

Yet Jesus said, **"But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."**

And remember, a sin is a sin is a sin: before God's judgment seat your little white lie or juicy tidbit of gossip is just as damnable as Herod's order to have John the Baptist beheaded.

Satan, our accuser, is an equal opportunity tormenter; if he can't get to forget our past sins altogether, then he'll paint our past sins on the canvas of our mind in the ugliest way possible.

Either way, his goal is to distract from God's promise to forgive by getting us to obsess over the terrible things we've done.

And if it weren't for Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross, Satan would be right to accuse us. Our sins, both the obvious ones and the seemingly insignificant ones, really would damn us.

We'd spend eternity in a place where gnawing obsession and guilt would be our daily reality because we'd rejected God's offer of salvation by grace through faith in Christ. **PAUSE**

My friends, Herod's guilt led him to incorrectly assume that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead. Herod was wrong, but there was One who did rise from the dead.

But it wasn't the resurrection of a man killed unwillingly only to come back and accuse a guilt-ridden king of his crimes.

No, the one raised was the Holy One, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity in human flesh, Jesus of Nazareth. (He is Risen!)

Jesus rose to life again after having been brutally executed with the approval of Herod. (Scripture says that he and Pilate became friends after their despicable deed.)

Jesus was executed for being who He claimed to be, the Son of God and the King of Kings (though his Kingdom was not of this world.)

He rose again, not to condemn those who put Him to death, but through faith in Him, to grant forgiveness of sins, life and salvation to all who would be brought to faith by the Holy Spirit.

If, like the man in Poe's story, your conscience bothers you for the things you've done wrong, rejoice that you still have a conscience and that the Holy Spirit is speaking the Law to you, showing you the error of your ways and bringing you to repentance.

And unlike Satan, the Holy Spirit points you to your Savior, who paid the wages of your sin and whose death destroyed death so that you can live with Him forever.

Satan and your telltale conscience may condemn you, but the Supreme Judge declares you to be not guilty by grace through faith for Jesus' sake.

Today the body and blood of the Final Prophet, Priest and King, who rose from the dead, will be presented to us guilty little Herods' as a medicine that heals our hearts and grants us immortality.

Indeed, the resurrection of Jesus (He is Risen!), a flesh and blood Savior, reminds us that we too will rise flesh and blood and live forever in our heavenly Father's kingdom. AMEN.