

Selected Sermons #4

The Festival Half of the Church Year by E. Schaller

MARK 6:16-29 4nd Sunday in Advent

But when Herod heard this, he said, “John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!”

For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

The king said to the girl, “Ask me for anything you want, and I’ll give it to you.” And he promised her with an oath, “Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.”

She went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?”

The head of John the Baptist,” she answered.

At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: “I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John’s disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Fellow sinners, redeemed by Christ from all that besets us -

It may seem a dreary and distasteful prospect for those who are already tense with the expectant joy of Christmas this morning to be asked to meditate upon a murder story – and our Gospel text is indeed one of the ugliest and cruelest murder records ever written – but surely it is more than a crime story, otherwise it would not be found in God’s Word. There is a reason that moved God to set forth the shameful deeds of this man Herod. Without such an explanation we would never have known what became of John the Baptist, that great preacher of repentance. There was also a further reason, for the Lord never included in his Word anything just to satisfy human curiosity. He has

something to teach us here, something indeed that is very definitely connected with our celebration of Christmas.

We never have to look very far at Christmas time in order to find sin – ugly, horrible sin – spoiling the beautiful story of our Savior’s coming. It was so on that first Christmas, which began with human sin when selfish, earthly-minded people did not know their Savior and turned his mother away, telling her that there was no room in the inn – and ended when Herod the Great, father of the Herod in our text, murdered the babies in Bethlehem for the same reason. Nor has the world changed since; so long as we celebrate the coming of God into our flesh here on Earth, we shall find that same sin round about us – and it will threaten even us, for it is not true that the world as such celebrates Christmas. They welcome Christ with sin – and it is always the same sin, the great sin, the one that is also at the bottom of all the dark deeds in our text. We will call it -

The Great Christmas Sin

- I. We hear that Herod committed it**
- II. We learn why he committed it**
- III. We will remember how to avoid it**

I. Herod committed the great Christmas sin. Do not look for it among the crimes listed in our story, the ones

that most people would consider the greatest sins of which a human being can be guilty. There is one other which outranks all of these, and it is set forth in the first verse of the Gospel text, *But when Herod heard, he said, "This is John, whom I beheaded; he has been raised from the dead."* Naturally we must ask, "What was it that Herod had heard?" The answer is that he had heard of Jesus Christ, who was even then like a heavenly light shining in the very country over which Herod ruled. The Son of God, the Savior of the world, was displaying his glory in preaching and in doing miracles. He had come after John the Baptist, as John said he would. There was no mistaking him; even blind eyes were opened to recognize him. And Herod was told – but did he seek and find his Lord? Did he follow up the signs until he came to the feet of Christ? Did he know his Savior? When Herod heard thereof, he said, "This must be John, whom I beheaded; he must have risen from the dead."

What does it matter that this did not happen at Christmas time? No matter what season of the year it was, **this was the great Christmas sin, and it is today –** that when Christ comes into a man's life, his heart refuses to say, "This is my God and my Savior!" The failure to recognize, to know Jesus as the Savior – this is **the greatest of all sins and the common Christmas sin.**

Instead of welcoming the Christ of God with glad faith, with the rejoicing of prisoners made free, men flick their minds over him and send him away.

Christmas brings us that sickening experience year after year as we listen to the world on the radio expressing what it calls its "Christmas faith." All the glory of Christ is revealed again; his story is told; the wonders of his birth are related; the prophecies concerning him are recited in verse and in song – until you think that no one who hears could find anything to say except, "I believe that this Jesus come from heaven is my God and my Redeemer from sin." Yet instead of such a confession, we hear them explaining Christmas away. People give every other reason for the importance of Christmas except the right one. The unbelief, the blindness with which many stand at the manger of Bethlehem is something to make us shudder.

They do not keep it silent but give voice and expression to it in the most serious way, just as Herod did when, having heard of Christ, said, "It must be John!" He really meant that, and his notion was no farther from the truth nor more ridiculous than the answers we get today from all sides when we ask, "What does Christmas mean to you?"

Some see nothing in it except the gory of motherhood as represented by Mary; others regard it as a beautiful

legend for children but think that Christ is Santa Claus; still others believe Christmas marks the birth of a great man who thought he could make peace among men and stop their fighting. They remind one of a blindfolded person stumbling about a room but it is a terrible blindness that afflicts many a college professor and others. They see, yet they do not see at all. **They commit the great Christmas sin; they do not know and will not receive their Savior.**

II. We know now that this sin exists and how common it is, but **do we know what causes it?** Why can our little children know Jesus – yet the mighty and the learned, hearing the same lovely story of Jesus' birth, do not know him? This we shall discover when we learn **why Herod committed the great Christmas sin.**

People like Herod are helpless in the glory of Christmas. They do not know their Savior because they cannot know him; their sin is an inescapable sin. But when we say, "people like Herod," we are not thinking of his great crimes at all. Surely he was a vicious man, a scoundrel; his character is well described in our Gospel, and we shrink from him in horror. Mark reveals him as the triple adulterer, *For Herod himself had sent and laid hold of John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; for he had married her. For John had*

said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

We will spare ourselves a complete account of his sordid life of carnal lusts. Mark also reveals him as an unjust king. Then we find him showing every feature of a dissolute, lustful man to whom no sins of the flesh were unknown. For example, at his birthday banquet he enjoyed the suggestive, seductive dancing of his false daughter, and he was so heavily gone in drunkenness that he swore to her the ridiculous oath to give her up to the half of his kingdom. We regard this man with disgust and we ask, "How could such a man of sin have been expected to recognize his Savior?"

But was it really his sinful condition that caused him to overlook what Jesus meant to him? If so, then who could hope to do better? All humans are sinners, and before God all are scoundrels. Is some sin perhaps thinner than others? Can some men know their God because they are less steeped in wickedness than are others? Then what does God mean when he says, "For there is no difference, for all have sinned" (Romans 3:22-23)? Ah, indeed, if sinfulness and wickedness were to hide the Savior until sin was done away with, then there would be no true Christmas for anyone! It is by the powerful grace of God alone that any human heart is able to see its Christ and

Savior, in the manger or on the cross. The thief on Calvary surely was as much a scoundrel as Herod, yet he was given mercy to know Jesus. Why not Herod?

Let me ask you, why did Herod, when he heard of Christ, mistake him for John whom he had murdered? Why was John so much on his mind? Because he was not finished with John, and until a man is done with the Baptist, he cannot ever recognize his Redeemer.

Last Sunday we listened to John's sermon, "Repent!" We learned what repentance is and why we must not resist it when it comes to us. Now, **that is what ailed Herod**, that he had not done what John required. Our text told us how John had faced the king over his adulterous union with Herodias and had laid bare his sin of living with her – that Herod might see, know it, and tremble in contrition; that his repentance might begin. If it had, and if he had put away that woman, if he had accepted also John's baptism for forgiveness of this sin, even this evil man would have known his Savior.

But Herod refused repentance. He just would not see himself as God saw him! This was not just some weakness in Herod; no, indeed. The Holy Spirit can overcome all weakness, and we note how the Spirit was working on Herod, *for Herod feared John, knowing that he*

was a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly. God shook this man to his very soul, trying to rouse him to his great danger, and Herod saw the danger but shut his mind against it. **No, he would not confess his sins;** he would not realize it – so he did not know his Savior.

And here you have the answer, the answer to all this false Christmas cheer that goes on in the world, to **the great Christmas sin** that waxes strong in a so-called Christian country. Jesus is greater than John, and yet John's work comes first; as he did then, so now. Those who have not listened to John cannot know Christ. And men have not bowed their heads in shame over their sins; there is little true contrition, little true confession of sin among the many who celebrate Christmas. They are still self-righteous.

When the world is in a great and bloody slaughter and war, and men long for peace, yet the real peace that knows Jesus as the Savior from sin cannot come to those who in their hearts have not truly repented of their own wickedness but continue instead to live, fight, die boastingly and secure – sure that they are good, sure that their sins cannot be as bad as John makes them. Therefore their crimes grow always worse as Herod's did,

and even in the glory of Christmas night they do not see or confess the Savior.

The great Christmas sin begins with the failure to repent.

III. Knowing this, **we are able this day to take warning** from Herod, that our Christmas will not be ruined by his sin. The sure way to eternal destruction is in not recognizing the Christ-child as our Savior. “He who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” (John 3:36) Above all else, we want this day to know and believe with all our heart that Jesus came from heaven to die for our sins. And, thank God, Herod has taught us that it is not our sinfulness or our many sins of weakness that will prevent us from knowing our Savior – for though in our eyes Herod was a monster, yet in the eyes of God he was only another sinner. His crimes were great, but so are ours – for are there sins greater than our cold indifference, our ungratefulness in thought and in deed, or the worldliness of our minds at Christmas time?

Yet God takes all these our sins into account. They were not too heavy for his child Jesus to bear; their ugliness did not dampen his love for us! **Christ Jesus was even Herod’s Savior**, and God’s Spirit was working at the heart of Herod. **Why not ours?** The work of John the Baptist has never been laid aside without eternal harm

for the soul that does so, and he who kills John's words in his heart will kill the words and works of Christ also.

That is the great Christmas sin! May God preserve all of us from seeing only John's ghost instead of seeing Jesus this Christmas! In his holy name, Amen!

Hark the glad sound! The Savior comes #66

Hark, a thrilling voice is sounding #60

Holy Father, in thy mercy #643