

God of Word and Wisdom, as we listen to your message today, enlighten our minds, nurture our souls, encourage our hearts, and stir our minds, so that we may live out your Word in the world you love. Amen

### **Sermon: What are we haunted by?**

Our Gospel reading this morning is one of the saddest in the entire Bible. It records the events surrounding the death of John the Baptist. He was a special man, chosen for a special mission. He was the “forerunner” of the Messiah.

He was the fulfillment of several Old Testament prophecies. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets. He was the last martyr of the Old Testament period and the first of the New Testament period. He was a powerful preacher. He was a fearless prophet. He was a true man of God. He had quite a resume.

While this passage reveals the details of John’s death, it also records the death of something else. This passage records the death of a conscience.

Do you ever feel like your life is haunted, like something unresolved has come to visit? Do you ever feel like something is wandering the hallways of your heart and mind, “a presence that is not quite a presence”?

Let me give you some examples of what I’m asking about.

Have you ever had the same dream over and over? Have you ever had the same images appear in your dreams? What is that dream or image? What does it want from you? Why do you think it won’t go away?

Do you ever replay in your head particular events or experiences wishing you could go back and redo or undo what happened, or what you said or did? It’s as if our past has been raised, is alive, and ever present.

Do you sometimes feel like guilt, regret, or disappointment are always lurking close by, tracking and following you? No matter what you do or how long it’s been you just can’t get past the feeling.

What thoughts never go away? Even when you’re not thinking them, they just show up uninvited and unwanted.

What memories would you like to erase or delete? You want to forget them, have tried to forget them, but they're always there. They won't let themselves be deleted.

I wonder what haunts our lives today.

I think we all have those kind of thoughts, feelings, memories, dreams, and experiences. They keep showing up, asking to be acknowledged, and wanting to be dealt with. No matter how many times we let go of them, they won't let go of us. And I wonder if that's what's going on with Herod in today's gospel. I wonder if he's a haunted man.

When Herod heard about Jesus and his disciples, and the powers at work in Jesus, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." That's how Mark puts it but that sounds too sanitized and calm to me. I think Mark has cleaned it up a bit. I imagine it was more like this: "Oh no! He's back. Why won't he let me be!?"

Jesus' deeds of power – calming the stormy sea, casting out demons, healing the hemorrhaging woman, raising Jairus' daughter – have confronted Herod with his own abuse of power – the beheading of John the baptizer. He killed the truth teller, but the truth John told just won't die. It won't leave Herod alone. He's a confused and conflicted man.

The confusion and conflict, however, are not between Herod and John, they're within Herod. They're between Herod and himself. Something unresolved has come to visit Herod.

On the one hand Herod knew John "was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him." On the other hand, "Herod feared John" and the truth he held up. On the one hand Herod "liked to listen to John." On the other hand, he "was greatly perplexed" by what he heard.

I know what that conflict and confusion are like, and I suspect you do too. We all have the unresolved parts of ourselves and our lives that come back to visit us. We all live haunted lives. And just like Herod we are usually haunted by what we have beheaded.

I'm talking about beheading as a metaphor for the ways in which we deny, ignore, reject, and turn away from parts of ourselves and our lives. I'm

talking about the ways in which we cut off parts of ourselves and aspects of our lives instead of dealing with them.

They are the parts of ourselves that we keep private and hidden not only from others but mostly from ourselves. It might be something we've done or said. It might be a relationship or past experience. It might be a personality trait, behavior, or attitude. It might be thoughts, feelings, fantasies.

Sometimes they are things we are not even aware of until someone points them out and when they do we feel angry, hurt, or betrayed.

We often call those cut off parts of our lives our shadow side. It's the dark side of who we are. Our shadowy side isn't necessarily bad, it's just that we don't recognize, acknowledge, or deal with it.

But here's the thing. We can never get away from our shadow. It haunts us. It won't let us go. "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

Do you remember being a kid and trying to outrun or get away from your shadow on a sunny day? How'd that work for you? And how's that working for you today?

Those shadow parts of our lives continue to visit us and when they do, we usually fight even harder to push them aside. We think the things that haunt us are our enemy but what if that's just not true?

Think about what haunts you today.

What if the things that haunt us are not out to get us but out to save us?  
What if each haunting serves a purpose?

What if our hauntings are information telling and showing us that something is wanting and needing to be dealt with?

What if each haunting is asking us to stop, pay attention, and deal with what is really going on?

What if each haunting presents an opportunity for healing, forgiveness, more wholeness, being made new?

What if our hauntings are a holy visitation? And what if Jesus is hidden in each of our hauntings?

After all, when the disciples saw Jesus walking on the sea they thought he was a ghost and they were terrified.

I wonder what it would be like for you and me to hold what haunts us as “a beckoning hand to our future”.

Yes, we'll have to face and admit some things about ourselves. We'll have to deal with some difficult and painful stuff. We'll have to uncover some uncomfortable truths. And we will become more real, more whole, more alive.

We all are quite aware that God “works in mysterious ways”. God is willing to let our souls and bodies suffer if it means we will humbly return to Him and trust Him. We need discernment from the Holy Spirit, so that we don't ignore God when he's trying to get our attention.

Let's not let the shadow parts of our life control us. Let us let the loving, healing and forgiving power of God fulfill us, with all that he sends our way.  
Amen