

REFORMATION DAY.

ANNO † DOMINI 2021

Text: Matthew 11:12. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

John the Baptist was in prison. He had been put there by Herod Antipas, a violent man, because he had been saying to him that it was not right for him to have his brother's wife. This would eventually earn him a violent death. John had been the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." But where was that kingdom now? Where was God? Why hadn't He come to his rescue? Had John not done what God had told him to do? Said what God had given him to speak? And yet this was his fate. This is how it would end: not with victory, a miraculous prison break or the conversion of Herod, but with complete and utter defeat.

Now, Jesus Himself would begin to experience the same kind of violence. He would increasingly find Himself at odds with the Pharisees and others who refused to believe in Him, saying, "Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" They would soon conspire to kill Him, and with a little help from violent men like Judas Iscariot and Pontius Pilate, they would succeed. Jesus would suffer and die the shameful death of crucifixion. So much for the kingdom of heaven.

Such violence continues to this day. You don't hear about it on the news much, but the kingdom of heaven continues to suffer violence. According to *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, more Christians were affected by persecution, including martyrdom, during the last century than in all previous centuries combined. If you visit persecution.com, you'll find a map showing where and to what degree Christians around the world suffer persecution today. It's not a short list.

Of course, we have our fair share of kingdom-violence right here. Oh, it may not look the same, we may not fear for our *lives* as Christians, but there are other ways of taking the kingdom of heaven by force. In the parable of the sower, Jesus uses the word "choke" to describe what happens to the one who hears the word, but the cares and riches and pleasures of life keep it from bearing fruit. If the kingdom of heaven is the gift of the Spirit, so that we may believe God's holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity, then the violence we suffer is the violence of *plenty*. We have plenty of stuff, plenty to do, plenty to divert our attention away from what really matters to what really doesn't. Who needs a sword when you have screens? Between mammon and machine guns, which does more violence to the kingdom? As one

commentator puts it, "Soft culture with its Gucci shoes is finally more dangerous than terrorist counterculture with its guerilla boots." Do not fear those who can kill the body, says Jesus, but rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Speaking of hell, let's not forget the devil's role in all this. Just because you might see some people dressed up as him tonight doesn't mean he's not real. No doubt, that's what he *wants* you to think. Anonymity is the best camouflage. But make no mistake: behind every threat to the kingdom of heaven stands the evil one. He is a violent creature, a murderer from the beginning, who has nothing but evil plans and purposes for you. He knows how to manipulate you, how to deceive and mislead you away from Christ into idolatry, despair, apathy, and worse.

And just like Herod, the Pharisees, and all who take the kingdom by force, he seems to get away with it. Again, we ask, where is God? If, as we say at the end of the Lord's Prayer, the kingdom and the power and glory are His, then why does it feel like we're losing? Where is the victory we were promised? Was John mistaken? Was Jesus a fake? *Are* we of all people most to be pitied?

Not if you know what the kingdom is like. If we imagine the kingdom of heaven to be like a giant, a mighty warrior, who comes to overthrow violent men, then we will be sorely disappointed. But when describing what the kingdom of heaven is like, Jesus actually compares it to a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds; and to a little leaven, that is, a pinch of yeast. Is that not how the kingdom of heaven appears now? Small and insignificant? "What did you expect to see?" Jesus asks the crowds concerning John the Baptist, "A man dressed in soft clothing?" No, John was a prophet, not a king. His job was to *decrease*, not increase. So too Jesus warned His disciples, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me." In other words, let him be ready to suffer for His name's sake. Even Christ Himself was despised and rejected by men, humbling Himself through obedience to the point of death, even death on a cross.

But while the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds, when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. And although it is but a little leaven, it leavens the whole lump. The kingdom of heaven grows. It *starts* small, it *appears* weak, but that will not always be the case. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." As surely as Christ is risen, the victory has been won. No matter how dire and hopeless the situation, or how fierce the attacks of the evil one, God's promises are sure. The Word of the Lord endures forever. Baptism now saves you. The Absolution declares you "Not guilty." The Lord's Supper feeds you with the very Bread of Life.

These are ordinary things with extraordinary significance. They are powerful, even if they seem weak.

So don't lose heart. Don't give up. Your work in the Lord is not in vain. How easy it is to become discouraged, as a pastor, a parent, a grandparent, or a friend. Victory in this life doesn't look like we imagined. It looks like suffering. It looks like the cross. It looks like reading the Bible at home to your kids with varying degrees of success, often failure. It looks like countless late-night conversations with a friend that seem to go nowhere. It looks like days, weeks, even years of prayer that seem to go unanswered. One day, it may even look like dying. But then, it will look like rising again. It will look like the promises of God fulfilled. It will look like faith in the most unlikely of places, the victory of Christ in the very throes of death. Wisdom will be justified. The mustard seed will have grown into a tree, the violent men taken by force and cast into the lake of fire, and from that day on into eternity there will be only peace and prosperity. For our God reigns. He is almighty. And the kingdom and the power and the glory are His.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

In † Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo gloria.

Questions for Review:

1. What violence against the kingdom do you see happening in the world today?
2. What is the kingdom of heaven like? How does this subvert our expectations?
3. Why should we not lose heart in the face of violent men?



“The Word of the Lord endures forever.”

