

THE FESTIVAL OF THE REFORMATION (OBSERVED)

Text: St. Matthew 11:12-15

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Saint John the Baptist had been imprisoned and lay languishing in the dungeon of Herod Antipas' prison. John was sent by GOD as the forerunner of JESUS to *"... go before the face of the LORD to prepare His ways, To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our GOD...."* He was sent to *"prepare the way of the LORD; to make His paths straight."* Sadly, he would pay the ultimate price for his efforts, and be put to death by beheading.

JESUS, the One whom John was to proceed, had surprised, one might even say confused, St. John with His ministry. This was the case from the very beginning when JESUS came to John in the Jordan River to be baptized by him. In an attempt to prevent Him, John asked, *"I need to be baptized by You and are You coming to me?"*

John the Baptist preached a Gospel of repentance and a fiery message of condemnation for those who thought themselves worthy of salvation through their own works. He called upon all of Israel to be converted and return to the GOD of salvation, *"... for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."* John warned that our LORD was coming with a *"winnowing fork in His hand"* in order to *"thoroughly clear His threshing floor"* as He gathers *"His wheat into the barn....,"* but burns *"up the chaff with unquenchable fire."* All who repent will receive the gracious mercy of our GOD; all who refuse to repent will face GOD's wrath.

But where was the wrath?

St. John knew who *he* is. He is the one foretold by the prophet Malachi: *"Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me."* Yes, he knew who he is, but was his cousin, this JESUS, whom he thought Him to be? Is He the *"coming One"*? Is He the long expected MESSIAH? After all, His ministry did not match John's expectations. Where *was* the wrath? Evil men and their deeds still reigned. John was no fool. He likely knew exactly what was in store for himself. If JESUS is the *"coming One,"* then where is the *"winnowing fork"* and the *unquenchable fire*?"

JESUS answered John: *"Go tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the Gospel preached to them."* The Old Testament prophecies are coming to fruition; GOD's promises fulfilled. JESUS is the *"coming One."* The Kingdom of GOD and its King are in our midst.

JESUS was telling St. John that evil, for a time, will retain its power but GOD's wrath will not be withheld forever. Now, however, is the time of grace and mercy in the forgiveness of sin. JESUS' first advent is one of peace and reconciliation. In CHRIST JESUS, GOD has come to heal and restore creation. He has come to those who are sick and in need of a physician, even in an age of opposition and hatred. Many will fall into unbelief because they expect something different from GOD and cannot see in CHRIST God's hidden Kingdom. But those who see in JESUS GOD's Kingdom, have the promise of salvation and eternal life through the forgiveness of sin.

Thus, John the Baptist's question was answered. He would be martyred, but he would die knowing the peace found in his cousin JESUS, the *"coming One."* Therefore, *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."*

St. John was called by our LORD the greatest among those born of women, the promised Elijah. Yet, he did not consider it robbery to be also among the least. His raiment was camel hair, and his diet was locusts and honey. He wandered in the wilderness of the desert he called home. He lived to serve GOD even if that service led him to a cruel death at the hands of evil men.

Here, we learn that the Kingdom of Heaven does not operate according to the principles of this world. The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence. It is the Kingdom of martyrs, a Kingdom of the lowly, and the weak. Our King was not born into glory, but the squalor of an animal stall. He did not grow up in a fine palace with the finest of clothes and food. He grew up in the poverty of an oppressed, conquered, desert people. JESUS did not ride to power on a noble white stallion with military fanfare and parades. He rode on the back of a humble donkey, parading to the only throne He would know in this life—a cruel and bloody cross. Yes, *"The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force."*

Therefore, JESUS is not the GOD imagined by men. After all, what god of man's imagination would give up the glory of Heaven, for a life of poverty, in an attempt to save a world that will despise him?

But as promised, that is exactly what our LORD did, knowing that the world of men would not accept Him as GOD, but instead, would abuse Him and kill Him as a heretic and blasphemer. His love for mankind compelled Him, for a time, to leave His glory behind, to deny Himself, and come in weakness and submission, and even suffer violence by the hands of evil men. Still, even this is not imagined by men, because it is by this violence, by JESUS' crucifixion, death, and resurrection that, the Kingdom of Heaven is won for all who are weak.

Yes, *"The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force."* That, too, was Luther's complaint. The Roman Church of Luther's day stood corrupt and bereft of the Gospel. Salvation was a matter of money, and the more money one had, the more salvation one could purchase in the form of indulgences. It was as though Heaven was for sale to the highest bidder. So, for example, if one gave enough money to the Church toward the building of St.

Peter's Basilica in Rome, one could buy his way out of purgatory (another aberration of the Roman Church) or even hell.

But Luther, just as John the Baptist, would not tolerate giving false comfort to secure sinners. Luther wanted to recover the pure, pristine Gospel of the ancient Christian Church, the Church in which the Gospel of salvation was preached for the benefit of all people, the Church in which the Holy Sacraments, with their saving promises, were available to all.

Yet, this was not simply a matter of Lutherans against the Church in Rome. It was more than that. It was only a few short years after the nailing of the *95 Theses* to the door of the Wittenberg church, that Luther saw an even more severe danger among the fringe of those who supported his cause but were denying Baptism to infants. They did not hold that Baptism worked regeneration in sinners and gave faith to children. These enemies of the Gospel denied that JESUS CHRIST shared fully in God. Thus, they denied that He was really and actually present in the LORD's Supper with His Body and Blood.

Luther would have less to do with these Protestants than he did with the Roman Catholics, who excommunicated him from the Church. The Catholics at least had the Body and Blood of CHRIST in the Sacrament; the so-called Protestants did not.

"The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force." The Lutheran Church, since the days of Luther, has been in danger of being overcome by violence and taken by the force of false teaching and false teachers; it has been in danger of being swallowed up by the ever-expanding list of false religions. Thus, on Reformation Day, we Lutherans realize that we are a minority. From the days before John the Baptist, even since the time of the Prophets, the Church has been under the same attack. It has always been, and will always be, this way.

Even now it seems that the Lutheran Church is losing sight of the doctrines it has so long believed. When we see a growing number of women assuming the role and the office of the holy ministry in many Lutheran congregations, as well as other offices where they hold authority over men, it gives voice to the fact that we no longer believe that the Words of Holy Scripture apply to us. Many Lutheran congregations speak of God using feminist language such as "Mother" and not "Our FATHER," as JESUS taught us. We may as well tell God we no longer need Him because we have a better, more loving, and more inclusive way.

Today, many Lutherans have come under the spell of the powerful American Evangelical movement in our country, even as the so-called protestants that Martin Luther would have nothing to do with, and have adopted a form of Christianity that robs the Sacraments of any significant meaning for salvation, and JESUS, Himself, becomes nothing more than a facilitator for holiness. They boast of their faith and their sanctified lives, when they should boast of CHRIST, His Gospel, and His Sacraments, and His salvation (Dr. David Scaer).

Sure, they believe that JESUS is necessary, but only to get you through the holiness door, then the rest is up to you.

Some even claim direct revelation from the HOLY SPIRIT. We hear them make claims like, *“The HOLY SPIRIT laid it upon my heart,”* or *“The HOLY SPIRIT came to me and revealed to me such and such.”* But dear ones, the only sure communication we have with the HOLY SPIRIT, the only Words we can truly rely on, come through the Words of Holy Scripture, the inerrant, divinely inspired Word of GOD, and those sweet Words are all the revelation we will ever need. Like all false teaching, these aberrant and heretical doctrines rob a Christian of confidence in the sure and certain promise of Scripture that GOD loved the world in such a way *“... that He gave His only begotten SON, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”*

Reformation Day is an uncomfortable Sunday that reminds us that we, as Christians, are going to have to make some uncomfortable choices at times, choices about defending our faith in CHRIST, choices about standing for what it is we believe, choices that put us at odds with friends and relatives.

You see, Reformation Day is about the truth of GOD’s Word; and GOD’s Word *“...is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”* Reformation Day is uncomfortable because it exposes who we are as Lutherans and the picture is not pretty because, like Esau, many among us have sold our birthright for a pot of beans. So, we must be eternally vigilant because, *“The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.”*

Yet, take heart. For even if we lose a battle, the Church will not and cannot lose the war. Even the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. *“For us fights the valiant One, Whom God Himself elected”* who *“holds the field forever.”*

CHRIST JESUS, through the HOLY SPIRIT, is always calling His Church back to the Gospel. He comes, not with violence and with no more force than the Word of GOD. But this is more than enough. Through His WORD ALONE He brings salvation to us by GRACE ALONE, THROUGH FAITH ALONE, SOLA GRATIA, SOLA FIDE, SOLA SCRIPTURA.

Beloved of GOD, JESUS has restored you to Himself with His own Body and Blood. Through His death and resurrection, He has paid the price demanded of your sins. He fulfilled the Law and the Prophets perfectly and gave to you the spoils of His victory over sin, death, and Satan. He has accomplished all there was to be accomplished and has declared all things complete. By this you are justified, that is, made right with GOD. Therefore, *“You who were once far off have been brought near by the Blood of CHRIST,”* all as a free gift, for *“by grace you have been saved, through faith...not of works.”*

Believe it! Come to His altar and receive the free gift of faith and forgiveness in JESUS’ Blood. Come, kneel, and hear your LORD and SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST say, *“I forgive you all your sins.”*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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