

The Festival of the Reformation – Pr. Faugstad sermon
St. Matthew 11:12-15: “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven Is at Hand!”
October 30/31, 2021 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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EXORDIUM

504 years ago today, Martin Luther put the finishing touches on Ninety-Five Theses, which especially criticized the sale of indulgences in the church. The sellers were telling people that by purchasing these indulgences, officially authorized by the pope, they could instantly free the souls of loved ones from purgatory. If they dropped so much money in the box, they could end the suffering of their relatives and friends.

Luther knew this wasn't right, though he did not yet fully understand the main reason. At this time, he thought people should not try to do with money what they should be doing with their prayers and good works. Later he realized that nothing more is needed to win heaven than the perfect life and atoning death of Jesus.

A golden coin could not free someone from God's wrath. A golden coin could not even cancel out one sin. By the grace of God, Luther came to believe and teach what the Bible teaches, that *“you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot”* (1Pe. 1:18-19).

Luther realized that this good news of salvation was for him, but he didn't keep it to himself. He wanted the whole world to know it. He preached and taught constantly, and his writings were distributed throughout Europe and beyond. But it is not Luther that we praise today. We praise the God who is merciful and gracious. He opened Luther's mind and heart to the truth of the Gospel, just as He has done for you and me.

He has shown us that it is not who we are or what we have done that saves us. We are saved entirely by what Jesus has done for us. We are saved by grace. All that we need to get to heaven, Jesus has supplied. This is not something we can afford to lose. It is not something to keep to ourselves. It is something that the whole world of sinners needs to hear. Let us now rise to sing our Exordium hymn, #583 – “God's Word Is Our Great Heritage.”

God's Word is our great heritage,
And shall be ours forever;
To spread its light from age to age
Shall be our chief endeavor.
Through life it guides our way;
In death it is our stay.
Lord, grant, while worlds endure,
We keep its teachings pure,
Throughout all generations.

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The sermon text for today is taken from the eleventh chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We hear these words again in Jesus' name:

[Jesus said:] "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. / "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who is not afraid of any wicked scheme of man or dark power of the devil, but who destroys their efforts by His powerful Word, dear fellow redeemed:

John the Baptizer was in prison. He was in prison for telling the truth. He told King Herod that it was not right for him to marry his brother Philip's wife. King Herod did not like hearing that. His wife—or rather his brother's wife—especially did not like hearing that. No one likes having their personal choices questioned. Each of us likes to have things our own way. But our own way does not lead us to the kingdom of heaven. Our own way leads us to everlasting destruction.

When John arrived on the scene, he shook up the people's own way of thinking. He did not come telling everyone what they wanted to hear. He came to say this: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*" You know what it means to repent. It means to recognize your sin and admit it. It means acknowledging that your choices are not always good ones, your words are not always edifying, your thoughts are not always pure.

But what did John mean by "*the kingdom of heaven is at hand*"? He meant that the earth was not going to be left to its own devices. Heaven's Lord was intervening. God had come down to earth. But He had not come only in the sense of being in all places at all times. God had come down to earth in a unique way, a mysterious way. God had become a Man. He had taken on human flesh in the virgin Mary's womb. The all-powerful God who made all things, who knows all things, who can do anything—He was here.

"*Repent!*" was a very appropriate message. Who could face the incarnate God? Who wouldn't tremble in His presence? The demons certainly trembled. They knew who Jesus was. They knew what He could do. But many people did not listen to John. They did not repent. They did not believe that "*the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" They did not believe that Jesus was who John said He was. They thought they were fine on their own, living the way they had always lived. There were many others who were worse than they were. The truly wicked people—those were the ones who needed to repent!

"*No,*" said John. "*No,*" said Jesus. "*You* repent. *Don't look at her. Don't look at him. Look at yourself. You* repent." This is the call of the Law: "Own your sinful words. Own your sinful actions. Own your sinful thoughts. Don't point the finger at others. *You* are guilty." That's hard for us to take.

From a young age, we do whatever we can to avoid the consequences of our sin. We lie about our bad behavior. We justify our wrongdoing. We point out all the weaknesses and missteps of those around us, so the focus isn't on us. But in trying to avoid guilt, we just feel guiltier. In trying to avoid shame, we feel more ashamed.

We know we are not as we should be. We are sinners. But heaven's Lord did not come to destroy sinners. He came to save them. "*Behold, the Lamb of God,*" said John, "*who takes away the sin of the world!*" (Joh. 1:29). "*The Lamb of God*" –not a ferocious lion, not a dragon breathing destruction—a lamb. Jesus came to be the sacrifice. He came to be slaughtered. He, without blemish or spot, came to give His perfect life in our place to pay for each and every one of our sins. "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!* –God has come down to save."

But those who will not repent have no need of "*the Lamb.*" No matter how good, no matter how kind, no matter how gentle, if He is not here to pat them on the back, if He is not here to praise them, they have no need of Him. When Jesus did not confirm the scribes and the Pharisees in their self-righteousness, they hated Him. They thought violent thoughts toward Him, which led to violent actions. They couldn't just ignore Jesus; they had to end Him.

It was the same way with John. All he did was speak. But King Herod couldn't leave it alone. Words really are the most powerful tool, the most powerful weapon, there is. That's why there are people today who see Christianity as the greatest threat to their plans. It's not because Christians are going to grab weapons to do physical harm. God never calls us to do that in His name. The enemies of Christianity see it as the greatest threat because they don't like the words that Christians speak – they don't like God's Word.

And God's Word is a force to be reckoned with. In fact, God's Word is the greatest power there is. The devil knows it; that's why he is constantly working to turn people away from the Word. God's Word does not return to Him empty. It accomplishes exactly what He wants it to (Isa. 55:11). What He wants it to accomplish is the softening of sin-hardened hearts, and the comforting of sin-stained consciences.

Our merciful Lord wants you to hear that Jesus' perfect life covers over all your failures to keep His Commandments. He wants you to hear that Jesus' innocent suffering and death satisfies His righteous wrath for your sins. He wants you to hear that Jesus' resurrection conquered death itself, which means death will not be the end of you.

John the Baptizer set the stage for all these things to take place. Once he opened his mouth, the world was never the same and never could be the same. Jesus highlighted this turning point in history when He said, "*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence.*" While it is certainly true that the arrival of the Christ stirred up the powers of darkness, a better translation here is not that something is attacking the kingdom of heaven, but that "*the kingdom of heaven is forcefully advancing.*"

The kingdom of heaven does violence. It does violence to human pride. It does violence to human greed. It does violence to human self-centeredness. The kingdom of heaven does this work by the power of the Word. Martin Luther explained this in the Second Petition of the Lord's Prayer: "The kingdom of God comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit,

so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and live godly lives here in time and hereafter in eternity.”

When John came on the scene, the kingdom of heaven forcefully advanced as He pointed to Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. And it continues to advance even now. As it advances, some react violently against it. They want to halt the progress of the Word. But others grab hold of it; they seize its promises and refuse to let go.

This is our heritage in the Lutheran Church. The Lutheran Church is a church of God’s Word. Despite overwhelming opposition, Luther grabbed hold of God’s gracious promises and would not let them go. We still benefit today from the forcefulness and the clarity of his confession. But the clear Gospel is of no use to us if we do not forcefully take hold of it, make it our own, and refuse to give up God’s promises even on pain of death.

John went to his grave for the truth. Luther was ready to. And now we are on the battlefield. But we do not fight alone. *“The kingdom of heaven is at hand”* – Jesus with His Word is at hand.

Stood we alone in our own might,
Our striving would be losing;
For us the one true Man doth fight,
The Man of God’s own choosing.
Who is this chosen One?
'Tis Jesus Christ, the Son,
The Lord of hosts, 'tis He
Who wins the victory
In ev’ry field of battle.
(*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* 251, v. 2)

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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