

The Kingdom Suffers Violence

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Word of God for our meditation today is from the Gospel text, “**From the time of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.**”

Let us pray,

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The kingdom of God came in full force with the appearance of our Lord. The way was prepared by his servant John the Baptist. The preaching of repentance and faith changed the hearts and minds of the people. The children of Israel were restored to earnestly seek after God, to amend their lives, to start bearing fruits of repentance. John the Baptist was not afraid to speak the truth. Crowds upon crowds, all of Judea and Jerusalem, came to hear his preaching. Jesus certainly did not diminish this impressive force. People crowded around houses to hear Jesus preach. They filled up beach shores and forced our Lord to preach from boats. The Word was by their side upon the plain, granting his good gifts and Spirit for all who would hear. All of the listeners experienced the kingdom of God with all its might: hearts turned, the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the mute speaking, the lame walking, the possessed whole again. All of this power demonstrated that the God of Israel was in fact ruling over his creation. The lies of the devil were destroyed by the true preaching of God; the judgment had come upon the devil. The sickness and death of sin repaired by the healing touch of Jesus. The kingdom of God conquered and continues to conquer through the ministry of Jesus.

Yet, it wasn't without a fight. Jesus says, “**The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force.**” With all this powerful working of God, how does Jesus' speech make sense? From whom does the kingdom suffer violence? Who is able to take it by force?

One group of violent men are those with power. Throughout the ministry of John and Jesus we encounter these men such as King Herod the Great, Herod Antipas who imprisoned John, and the elders of Jerusalem who killed Jesus. Herod the Great was led by fear, fear of losing his power. When he heard that there was this baby boy born called “King of the Jews,” jealousy clouded his mind. This violent man tried at all cost to extinguish Jesus our Lord. Yet, the kingdom of heaven survived, through the loss of those innocent babies in Bethlehem. John the Baptist suffered imprisonment from Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. The powerful preaching of John was shut up

by a leader who knew this preaching was too dangerous to remain standing. Even though Herod knew this was a righteous man, he could not let this prophet of God continue to speak and call men to repentance. The most shameful were the leaders of the Jews. They could not let the kingdom of God continue to reign through the ministry of Jesus. At the opportune time, they had to remove any threat to the current political stability. The Romans could not think there was instability among these rebellious Jews. Therefore, there could be no preacher of truth who led crowds upon crowds, who had welcomed him as the son of King David. “Peace” and “quietness” supplanted truth and integrity.

These weren’t the only violent men who fought against the kingdom of heaven. Others tried to stop the preaching of John the Baptist and our Lord Jesus through their own false teaching. See, these men, such as the Pharisees and the scribes, could not accept the kingdom of God as it was revealed through our Lord; they would not have any thanks for this purely preached Word. It didn’t meet their expectations. They couldn’t stand the call of repentance John made (they certainly didn’t like being called a brood of vipers either). Their own pride made it impossible for the inward reflection necessary to repent. They were even more furious at the ministry of Jesus. “He picked wheat on the Sabbath? He healed people at the synagogue? He forgave sins?! This man cannot act like God!” These Pharisees and scribes would not let their own authority be diminished for this Jesus of Nazareth. So, they tried to trap Jesus. They trapped him with willy questions. They trapped him by trying to make him suspect to the Romans or the political leaders. Anything to quiet this humble teacher and healer.

Yet, we know who was really behind all this violence: Satan and his demons. The devil could not let God work his love and mercy. He tried throwing around his deep guile and great might to stop the kingdom of God. The old evil foe was there at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, trying to destroy the God-man with temptations. Satan was there oppressing the people of God with sickness and mania. Satan implanted the lies and deceit of the false teachers, to mislead those uncertain of our Lord’s teaching. All of this evil thrown and charged at the kingdom of God saw its source in this evil angel who wanted nothing more than to destroy God’s work.

“The kingdom suffers violence and the violent take it by force” was not only applicable to Jesus’ earthly ministry. It has been true also since he ascended again to God’s throne. We see this in the time of the Reformation and in our own time.

When Luther began to preach the Word of God purely and plainly, these three evil forces could not stomach the kingdom of God boldly proclaimed by teaching the pure Gospel. Popes and political rulers, who saw their own power diminish when the Gospel was proclaimed, needed to quiet this man at all costs. Condemnations from the emperor and the pope flew as quickly as Luther could preach God’s Word rightly. The fear of losing power clouded the judgment of these men. False teachers also tried to tear down the pure preaching of the Gospel. These false teachers were offended that Luther’s teaching on the full forgiveness of sins for Christ’s sake would lead to evil living among

Christians. Fear and uncertainty led these men to rebuke the truth of God's Word. Do not be mistaken to think the devil was not behind this either. He had spent much time clouding over the truth of God's Word by leading both the priests and the laity to focus their time and energy on pursuits other than the pure Gospel of Christ. The devil led and deceived them to turn Christ into a stern lawgiver, instead of the fountain of grace and mercy. So, people instead, when in need, went and sought help from Mary and saints. The kingdom of heaven suffered much violence in the time of the Reformation. Every evil force came out to attack the preaching of the truth.

The kingdom of God suffers violence now. There are many in power who hate the teaching of Christ. What Jesus has to say on the family, fatherhood, roles of men and women, marriage, life of the unborn, and more is a stench to them. They think that we would live in a utopia if those "bible-believing" Christians were gone. No wonder they tried to keep churches closed while casinos and theaters went untouched. No wonder churches keep getting vandalized for proclaiming the truth. No wonder the violent try to take the kingdom and destroy it. Even worse are those that twist the Word of God and try to present a false Jesus: "Jesus never said anything against homosexuality. Jesus never said anything against abortion. Jesus never said anything against women preachers." They invent for themselves a Jesus because the one they are confronted with when reading the clear words of Scripture is not one they could follow. The Jesus from "those Christians" is hateful, bigoted, and living in antiquity. The kingdom of God still suffers violence from the same types of groups to which John the Baptist and our Lord preached: those in power and false teachers. The father of lies and murder is not resting easy until Christ returns to judge the living and the dead.

What is the end of this violence? Is the kingdom of God overpowered? Does the scowling of the devil amount to anything? No, of course not! The almighty fortress of God's kingdom remains through the Word of God purely taught. The Valiant One was not stopped by his death on the cross. No, he rose from the dead, conquered death, and gave power to the Gospel he handed off to the apostles. The kingdom continued its march as the apostles and the church spread throughout the world. Nation after nation received the Gospel preached and little by little light began to shine in the darkness. That one man Martin Luther was not quieted. Through the grace of God more and more saw the truth of the Scriptures: man is justified by faith alone on account of Christ's merit. Though the pope and the emperor were all eager to devour Luther and the reformers, the Word of God could not be stopped.

What is our weapon for today? How will the kingdom of God continue to conquer as Jesus Christ reigns on his throne? The weapon is the pure Word of God taught and preached. It starts in this location: the Word taught in this pulpit, in those Sunday school classrooms, and in that Luther hall. Here, Jesus the eternal ruler speaks his word through the mouths of those called. It continues in your homes: the Bible read at meal times and at the start and close of the day. Parents, you are in the place of God, feeding with spiritual milk those subjects of the Lord. It grows within our neighborhoods and

communities: friends and neighbors are taught who Jesus is and what his Gospel means for them. The royal banners of Christ march out and are valiantly displayed whenever you say something as simple as, "Repent my friend, and believe in the Gospel." Will it be instantaneous? No. Will it try our patience? Yes, because our time is not God's time. Yet, the work must go on. Tremble not! No harm can fall upon you. If there is anything to learn from the Reformation, anything to learn from the ministry of John the Baptist and our Lord, it is the endurance of God's kingdom through the Word of God preached rightly. All else might fall away, but this kingdom of God, this Word taught purely, must remain ours forever. Amen.