

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

We read as follows 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)

*This is Your Word, heavenly Father; **sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth.** Amen.* (John 17:17)

Dear Fellow Redeemed,

The days of Elijah were very difficult.

The United Kingdom of Israel, once ruled by Kings David and Solomon, had divided into the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern Kingdom of Judah. For 100 years the northern Kingdom of Israel had never had a righteous king, and King Ahab was the worst, multiplied by the wickedness of Jezebel, his wife. Under their reign, the prophets of Yahweh had been killed and priests to Baal and Asherah were supported by the King and Queen.

It was into this environment that the Lord had called Elijah to work.... And it was hard work. He was in hiding for 3.5 years during a drought brought about because of Israel's unfaithfulness. He was the 1 prophet of the Lord that faced off with the priests of Baal and Asherah at Mt. Carmel. There he challenged the people of Israel, King Ahab, and the 850 priests; he challenged them to pit the Lord against Baal, and as the Lord brought fire down upon the altar, Israel cried finally acknowledging and out, "**The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!**" But even after that, Elijah fled to Mt. Sinai because Jezebel had vowed to kill him. There Elijah found out that only 7,000 in all Israel had remained faithful to the Lord. Yet, the Lord continued to send Elijah after Ahab to call him and all Israel to repentance.

The Bible never tells us of a great nation-wide revival in Israel. In fact, quite the opposite. But as Elijah was preparing to enter into glory, we hear that he went from one house of the prophets to another, being strengthened by them and encouraging them. And after Elisha took up Elijah's mantle, we hear that they needed to build more houses of the prophets (their seminaries) because they were growing. Elijah's work had been blessed!

As Jesus said, John was "**Elijah who is to come,**" meaning that John would serve as Elijah had. John had the same environment of unbelief in Israel to face in his days. But in John and Jesus' day, it wasn't pagan religion that the Jews were so much mixed up in. The chief priests of the Jews, the Pharisees, and Sadducees were the religious authorities in Israel. Though they claimed Scriptural support for their traditions and actions, they were hardened against the Lord's Word, neither truthfully examining their hearts against the Law, nor seeking the salvation of the Gospel, being redeemed by the Messiah. But when John began to preach in the wilderness, "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,**"

the people flooded to him.

Even Roman soldiers were found in the crowds seeking salvation.

Like Elijah before him, John was not bashful about calling out the false religious leaders.

"You brood of vipers," he called them and warned them to flee from the coming wrath

by giving up the false comfort in their lineage as Abraham's descendants and in their own works.

And like Elijah before him, he was not received well by the king.

But his work was blessed!

...

The religious environment into which Jesus began His ministry was one where people were **"as sheep without a shepherd."** Matthew 9:36

The people were starved for spiritual comfort, having lived under the tyranny of Jewish legalism.

Always working to do good, yet never knowing that you have done enough good.

Always trying to compare yourself to others:

a) if to those you consider greater sinners than yourself, then you are tempted to pride,

b) but if to those you consider better than yourself, then you can easily be tempted to despair.

But this hardened religious environment is exactly what made the breach into which the Gospel was able to violently break through...

which actually brings us to a consideration of the text in the Greek.

There can be two ways to translate the phrase, **"the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence."**

While it is true that the kingdom of heaven seems to suffer violence here

as persecution breaks out all over the globe like for John and Elijah, this isn't where Jesus is going.

Jesus is talking about how John and Elijah and the prophets fought for the kingdom of heaven to come into this dark, sinful world, which fits very well with the other possible translation,

"The kingdom of heaven has been coming violently, and the violent take it by force..."

John, Elijah and the prophets preached forcefully. They were uncompromising in God's Word.

They were bold & would not bend (like a reed in the wind), when persecution for the Gospel came.

And the violent who take the kingdom of heaven by force are those who,

despairing of their own righteousness, cling furiously to the Word of God's forgiveness and mercy.

They will not let it go, not for all the fading and false joys and comforts here on earth.

This is a great text for this last mini-season of Trinity called Michaelmas

because the emphasis of the season is on the spiritual warfare we face.

Sometimes we can fool ourselves, thinking that it is not such a serious struggle.

Yet Jesus talks about His people being violent, not in a verbal or physical way,

but tenaciously holding on to the Gospel, fighting for it

against the accusations of their conscience and Satan, and

against those who would rob them and their neighbors of God's comfort and forgiveness.

That tenacity was something that we see in Dr. Martin Luther of the 16th century Reformation.

Who was he, what position did he hold, to go up against the papacy to condemn its many errors?

He wasn't a great world power. He wasn't even a bishop.

At first, he was a monk, a priest, and a professor at a new university up in Wittenberg, Germany.

But through the pangs of conscience that he had to fight with,
and by the clear revelation of God's Word that we are **saved by grace through faith
and not by our own works**,^{Ephesians 2:8} God led him to see Jesus Christ,
not as another or new law-giver, but as his Savior from his sin and guilt.

Luther became a violent man, not backing down even before the emperor and pope,
in order to preach the Gospel of forgiveness through faith alone in Christ
to people seeking their Savior and Shepherd.

His violence wasn't with sword or fist, but with pen and mouth.

He wielded the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, which equipped him for every battle.
And his work was blessed!

On this festival of the Reformation, we can thank God for such violent men
as the prophets, Elijah, John the Baptist, the Apostles, and Dr. Luther.

We can consider their tenacity and steadfastness in the face of hard persecution as examples to us
of the godly violence that Jesus here condones.

Each of these men came at a time when evil seemed to be gaining the upper hand,
and yet, they fought for the souls of their neighbors, calling them to repentance and to faith.

We can look at their example in a number of ways.

1. You can look at them and think, I could never do that.

They were so bold and eloquent, but me, who am I?

Don't you think that they had those same thoughts. They were nobodies in this world.

None of them were kings, or bishops, just common men that the Lord had chosen as His own.
Or...

2. You can look at them and think, I can be just like them, never backing down.

This is certainly a God-pleasing desire, but be on your guard. Peter, too, thought this way.

And even after Jesus warned him to "watch and pray," Peter fell into temptation
and disowned his Savior on the very day that Jesus died for all of his sins.

The temptation to pride is strong, thinking that you can do this by your own personal strength,
but you cannot. And neither did any of these men.

But consider: around whom are both of these ways of thinking centered?

(That I could never be like them and that I can be just like them.)

Both this timidity and pride are centered around your thoughts of yourself. The devil loves this.

This he can work with. He loves your self-doubts. He loves your self-confidence.

He can easily bring you down with these, just as he did to Peter.

But Elijah, John the Baptist, and Luther were not violent because of their personal strength.

They were these spiritually "violent" men because they had a Savior who was violent first.

Now we don't think of Jesus like this very often, do we?

We think of Him as this calm, soft-spoken gentlemen.

He certainly was that, but neither did He back down from those who were teaching falsely.

Nor did He pull punches against the hypocrites and those living in sin,

because their false comforts, false teachings, and false lives all led to hell and eternal suffering;

the very thing He had come to save them from.

To mix parables, Jesus is the One who is stronger than the strong man (the devil) who tries to keep this world in the bonds of our sin.

The devil tried to *wrest the kingdom from [the] Son* by having Him tried and violently crucified.

It looked to all the world, even to His own disciples, as if the devil had won that battle, and the war, yet as Martin Luther taught us to sing so boldly, *the victory remained with Christ*,

Who violently, tenaciously clung to His Father's Word

and believed it even though He was forsaken, bearing the full load of all your sins.

And on the 3rd day, He violently kicked death in the teeth and crushed the serpent's head

as He rose to life again in all His glory.

And His work of redemption was blessed!

Men and Women and children of such spiritual violence because you are redeemed and forgiven,

You have the same fleshly weaknesses, and timidity and pride, and sin and guilt and devil after you that Elijah, John, Peter, and Luther had.

But you have the same Word from God, the same forgiveness, the same Savior that they had, too.

You have the same faith and hope and love that gave them boldness and certainty

in the face of persecution - because you have the same Spirit breathing into your heart,

"your sins are all forgiven."

You have the same fear, love, and trust in God given to you through Baptism,

because it is Jesus' perfect fear, love, and trust in God.

And by your Baptism you have the same love for your neighbor that encourages you

to humbly and joyfully speak to your neighbors of the consequences of sin

and their salvation in Jesus.

And your work will be blessed.

Your spiritual violence and tenacity does not come from within yourself

but wells up in you as you are more and more convinced of your own forgiveness and salvation

in Jesus Christ your Lord.

Thanks be to God. **Amen**

Soli Deo Gloria