

In Nomine Iesu

The Third Sunday of Advent 2022

The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, but brings peace – Matthew 11:11-15

“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 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.”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Dearly beloved in Christ:

The people in Jesus’ time understood that before they could expect the promised Savior to appear among them, as Moses had foretold, that another Elijah would make himself known to them. They knew this from the prophet Isaiah and the last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi. Through Malachi God had promised His people Israel: “Behold, I will send Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to children, and the hearts of children to their fathers. (Malachi 4:6)

I

Elijah the prophet lived during the days of the wicked King Ahab and his wife Jezebel about 800 years before Jesus began His earthly ministry. The weak-willed Ahab,

as his father Omri before him, allowed the misleading religious innovations introduced into Israel by its first king, Jeroboam, to go unchallenged. But that was only the beginning of the damage he did. Under the influence of his strong-willed Phoenician wife, herself the daughter of the king of Sidon, Ahab led his nation to reject true worship of God and, in its place, he officially sanctioned Phoenician, that is, Canaanite paganism. Hundreds of false prophets, priests of Baal, received Ahab's approval and support to spread their false teaching throughout the land. Altars and high places, that is, outdoor shrines devoted to Canaanite fertility gods and goddesses, were built and eagerly used. Even the most hideous practice of the Phoenicians was copied, the sacrifice of their own children in fire. Into this nightmare of idolatry God sent His prophet Elijah. His message was one of repentance. He was to make the people see their sin by a strong preaching of the Law, pointing out to Ahab and his wicked queen, and to all the people, the way of the true God, and of the coming Messiah. For this Elijah was denounced by his king, attacked, and forced to flee for his life, which Jezebel the queen, in her hatred, demanded. So, we see, the violent used violence to silence Elijah, the "troubler of Israel," as Jezebel called him.

John the Baptist was the latter-day Elijah, about whom Jesus added: "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come." Let's not forget that John was only 6 months older than Jesus, so the days Jesus was speaking

of were only the last 30 years or so. What had happened in those thirty years? Well, what happened to all the two year-old and under boys in and around Bethlehem only months after Jesus was born? Herod had them killed. What were Herod's orders as he neared his own death? He ordered his soldiers to kill thousands of their own citizens so that the day of Herod's death would always be mourned by many. No wonder that God warned Joseph in a dream to flee with Mary and Jesus to Egypt! The violence of which Jesus speaks in our text had begun.

Later, what was the attitude of the Pharisees and Sadducees toward John and his preaching? Their hatred of him was like that of the prophets of Baal toward Elijah. So much did they hate him and his message of repentance to prepare themselves for the coming of the Savior that John publicly called them "a brood of vipers." And Herod's weak-willed son, like King Ahab 800 years before with Elijah, how much violence was he willing to allow? Well, he imprisoned John and went on to behead him in order to entertain his strong-willed wife and step-daughter. No, John didn't come into the blatantly idolatrous times that the first Elijah did, but hatred and violence were everywhere. Why? What was the origin of the violence toward John? Jesus? Or should we ask, who? Who would gain by inciting violence toward the one who was preparing the way for the Messiah? Who would gain by inspiring opposition to the promised Savior of Israel, and the world? Who?

II

Consider again today's brief text, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one

greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 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.”

Whenever Jesus used the expression, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear,” as He often did with His parables, it was never because the parables were hard to grasp. No teacher ever uses illustrations to bewilder and confuse students. No, not at all, what Jesus said here, as with His parables, is **not difficult to understand**, but **difficult to believe!** Wait a minute, pastor, do you mean to tell me that Satan really incites hatred and violence against all those who stand with Christ? Yes, that is exactly it, exactly what Jesus is saying. And the closer you are to Christ, the more Satan will trouble you. The devil’s purpose is to destroy Christ, if possible – at it isn’t - and damage His kingdom.

Again, consider what Jesus said in the same Gospel of Matthew, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:11-12) So, how does Jesus speak here of John? “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.” All of the prophets who came before John foretold the coming of

Christ and were persecuted for it. All were faithful, Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, all of them. But of John alone does Jesus say, “among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John.” Prophets and kings desired to see what John saw, and never did, even as Jesus told His own disciples, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you the many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.” (Luke 10:23-24)

But again, why is this said of John that he is the greatest? What is so special about him? And, why, just a few verses later in this same 11th chapter of Matthew does Jesus say that Capernaum, the town Jesus lived in, was “exalted to heaven?” And why does Elizabeth – “filled with the Holy Spirit” – say to Mary, “Blessed are you among women?” And why is the angel sent by God to Mary the only one among the myriad of the heavenly host named? - Gabriel. Why? What do Capernaum, Elizabeth, Gabriel, Mary, and John all have in common? **What they have in common is their nearness to Jesus, the Christ!** Their nearness to the greatest mystery of all time, the incarnation of the Son of God, who would reconcile God and man in His own body. Capernaum is the one town in the world whose streets Jesus regularly walked as He “increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.” Elizabeth was the mother whose as-yet-unborn child heard the voice of his Lord’s mother, and first leapt for joy. Gabriel is the only angel who had the great honor of speaking the word of God to Mary that enabled the incarnation. Mary alone was the mother of the Messiah, something faithful women of Israel had desired to be since the time of Eve. And

John? John was the only prophet who not only foretold the coming of the Christ, but had the great privilege of pointing to Him whom he had so recently baptized, saying, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!”

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“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” Dear fellow redeemed, believers in the Lord, members by faith of the kingdom of heaven. You may be the least in the kingdom of heaven, but consider what has been promised to you by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the Son of God and Son of Man. Your glory in heaven will be greater than any John ever had in his entire life and ministry, greater even than when He pointed to the newly-baptized Christ and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!” (John 1:29) For in heaven, your nearness to Christ, God and Man, will be closer than anything John or Mary or Elizabeth or the residents of Capernaum ever had here, and – what is more – your closeness to Him will last forever, and will never be disturbed by violence or the violent again. You will know the peace that has no end, because Christ bore all the violence of Satan so that He could bring you forgiveness, life, and peace.

The old English carol says it well, in the verse so often omitted when we hear it on the radio. It is the verse death, hell, and Satan, and all the violent so fear:

Nails, spear shall pierce Him through

The cross be borne for me, for you;
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The Babe, the Son of Mary! (ELH 145:2)

Yes, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence still today, just as it always has. But, dear friends, it brings peace, the peace that passes all understanding, the peace that the world does not know. How joyful we should be as we prepare for Christmas once again, and the coming of the Prince of Peace. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria