

Jesu Juva

“Pointing to Jesus”

Text: Matthew 11:12-19; Romans 3:19-29; Revelation 14:6-7

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

John the Baptist! That’s who we heard about in the Holy Gospel today. What’s he go to do with the Reformation? Well, perhaps more than you think . . .

For if I had to pick one person in the Scriptures that Martin Luther was the most like, I think I would pick John the Baptist.

Both spoke the truth to authority: John to the Jewish leaders and King Herod, and Luther to the Pope and the Emperor.

Both were pretty fiery preachers who didn’t mince words, but told it to you straight.

Both were imprisoned for doing so: John was in Herod’s prison; Luther’s imprisonment was of a more friendly kind - protective custody, in the Castle Wartburg. But it was still a kind of imprisonment for him. Luther didn’t want to be there, and was taken there by force.

And then John was beheaded. Luther wasn’t, but he legally could have been, were it not for his protector. The emperor declared him an enemy of the empire, and with such a designation, anyone who killed him would not only not be punished, but would be praised for doing a service for the empire. But others in Luther’s day were martyred, including two young men who were burned alive for refusing to recant the evangelical faith. Luther wrote a hymn about them to spread their story.

John and Luther had a lot in common. But none of that is really why I think these two are alike. Rather, all those similarities come from the main reason why they are so alike: **they both proclaimed the same message**. Both John and Luther were all about one thing: pointing to Jesus and proclaiming “*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29). Artwork depicting them often shows this, too, as you can see on the cover of your bulletin today.

If you look at the cover, you see first John, who is often shown beside the cross of Jesus with a lamb at his feet and the Scriptures in his hand, and pointing to Jesus with an abnormally large pointer finger, telling you: *there’s the one the Scriptures speak of; there’s the Lamb of God!*

And Luther, too, is often shown in a similar way, in his pulpit, with the Scriptures open and pointing to Jesus on the cross, preaching to his congregation: *there's the one the Scriptures speak of; there's the Lamb of God!*

So they are very much the same, John and Martin. Both were all about Jesus. Both wanted all the world to know the Lamb of God. Both were all about the forgiveness of sins.

And that's what the Reformation is all about. It's not about Luther, it's about Jesus. It's about the forgiveness of sins that we have by grace through faith in Him. That this forgiveness is not something you can earn or deserve, it is a gift. That's the good news God preached to Adam and Eve, that was preached all through the Old Testament and all its sacrifices, all those lambs, that was accomplished by Jesus, and now goes into all the world. *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*

And for that, John and Luther were opposed. For that, they suffered violence. For as we heard: ***From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.***

The violent take it by force. The picture you can imagine with those words is of an army storming a castle, a fortress, not entering by the gate, but trying to take it by force; overcome it with the sheer force of their power and effort and strength.

Well the gate, the door, to the kingdom of heaven, the Scriptures tell us, is Jesus (John 10:7-10). His sacrifice on the cross, His blood poured out as the Lamb of God, opens the kingdom of heaven to all who believe. His gift, received by faith. Yet there are those who try to take the kingdom of heaven by force, which is to say, storm it and try to enter not by the door of Jesus' forgiveness, but on their own, with their own efforts and strength, by virtue of their virtue, because of their good works.

In John's day it was the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders who were focused on the Law and their fulfilling of it, to please God and earn your salvation. In Luther's day it was the teaching that your merits, your good works, your pilgrimages, your monastic life of poverty, obedience, and chastity, your efforts, could get you into the kingdom of heaven. And in our day there continue to be many who believe that, too: *that heaven is for good people.* I heard it again in a conversation at the airport just a few weeks ago.

But we heard something very different from the Scriptures today. From Romans we heard that ***by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.*** No human being is good in the sight of God. You might be in your own eyes, you might be in the eyes of your fellow human beings, but no one measures up to God's standards. I don't care who you are or what you have done.

For, Paul continues, *all have sinned . . .* but then he adds this: ***and [all] are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*** Your justification, your being right with God, your entry into the kingdom of heaven, is a gift, through the redemption, through the blood, of Jesus. Jesus, the one of whom they said: ***Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!***

Those who said that meant it as an accusation, something to accuse Jesus with and discredit Him, like we see so much in politics today - that Jesus hangs out not with the good, respectable folks, but with the lowlifes, so He must be one, too. But those words, right there, that were meant as an accusation, are *exactly* the good news that John and Luther preached. **Jesus is a friend of tax collectors and sinners.**

So are you a sinner? Are you an outcast? Do you look in the mirror and not like the person looking back at you? Are you someone not as good as the next guy? Do you have sins that no matter how hard you try to cannot overcome? Have you let others down? Have you let God down? Do you struggle with doubts and fears and worries?

If that's you, you have a friend. Someone on your side, who came to do what you could not; who came to do what you would not. Who came to give you a holiness and righteousness you could never achieve on your own, and with that the gift of the kingdom of heaven and eternal life. And there He is, your friend, on the cross; on *your* cross, with all your sins, paying for them for you. *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*

Now those who think heaven is just for good people and who think they are pretty good, who think they can get in on their own, who don't want the kingdom of heaven as a gift but as a reward, who don't want to be a sinner but who try to justify themselves and their actions by excuses or circumstances or comparisons, don't want to hear all that, don't want to hear a call to repentance, don't want to be told they can't do it. *And so they respond with violence.* John is silenced by beheading. Jesus was crucified. All but one of the apostles were martyred, many in the early church too. They tried to silence and kill Luther. And now they are executing Christians in the Middle East, on our college campuses, and in the media. And maybe you've felt it, too. Still today, *the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.*

And you hear all this, you see all this, and it's frightening. But do not despair. There's something else about your friend we heard today. *A Mighty Fortress is our God* (LSB #656). Or in the words of Psalm 46, Luther's inspiration for writing that hymn: *God is our refuge and strength . . . the God of Jacob is our fortress.* That is also what John and Luther had in common - that faith. That as Luther wrote, no matter what the violence, no matter if they *take our life, goods, fame, child, and wife . . . our victory has been won.* **We are safe in fortress Jesus.** John was in prison, yet he was safe. John was beheaded, yet he lives. Luther continued to preach the eternal Gospel because he knew that, even as

an outlaw, he was safe. Until Jesus comes again, there is and always will be violence in our world and against the Gospel - satan will see to that. **But through it all, we are safe in fortress Jesus.** In Him, your sins cannot condemn you. In Him, satan cannot have you. In Him, death cannot hold you. In Him, death cannot end your life - the kingdom and eternal life *yours remaineth*.

That is the Rock on which the Church is built and stands, *even when steeples are falling and spires have crumbled in every land* (LSB #645 v. 1). And when the violence increases, when the opposition ramps up, the Church of Jesus does not shrink and hide. For at just such times, it is more important than ever for the Church *bells to be chiming and calling the young and old to rest*. To rest in **fortress Jesus**. Rest even in the midst of trouble and violence. Rest in the forgiveness of sins and the promise of everlasting life. Rest that is found no where else. Rest in the promise given in Baptism that you are God's child, dearly loved. Rest in the promise given in Absolution, that your sins are forgiven and cannot separate you from your heavenly Father. Rest in the Supper, where Jesus gives you His Body and Blood - His pledge that your Body and Blood are going to rise and live after death, too. Whenever, however it comes. Rest, because all this is yours, your Saviour's gift to you. You don't have to do it; you can't do it. But He did it, the Lamb of God. *For you*.

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We'll sing that again today, as we do every Sunday. It is what the Reformation is all about. Pointing to Jesus. Pointing to His cross. Pointing to His gifts. Pointing to His forgiveness. Pointing to His promises. Pointing all the world to Him. Just like John and Luther, who worked their pointer fingers to the bone. That all people - that you - may know Jesus: your friend, brother, your fortress, and your Saviour.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.