

29 October 2023
The Festival of the Reformation

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“The Peace of Jesus in a World of Violence”
Text: Matthew 11:12-19; Romans 3:19-28; Psalm 46

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

Six years ago, in 2017, a big deal was made about the 500th anniversary of Luther's posting of the 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg - the event that kicked off the Reformation. Since then, there have been other 500th anniversaries for other Reformation events and milestones, some of which we have remembered. In 2020, it was the 500th anniversary of Luther's three great theological treatises, including *On the Freedom of a Christian*. 2021 marked 500 years since Luther's famous “Here I Stand” speech at the Diet of Worms.

And this year, 2023, marks the 500th anniversary of another significant event - though one that is far less known than those others. On July 1, 1523, two young men - Hendrik Voes and Jan van Essen - became the first two Lutheran martyrs. Many, including the Pope and the Emperor, wanted that honor to go to Luther himself! And Luther thought he would be, but, he said later, he was not worthy. And this martyrdom wouldn't even happen in Germany, but in Brussels, which was then a part of the Netherlands. Two young men were imprisoned, refused to recant that we are saved by grace through faith alone, and so were burned at the stake. When Luther found out about it at the end of that month of July, he wrote a hymn - the first hymn he ever wrote - to commemorate these young men and their memory. I won't read the whole thing, but here are the first two verses:

A new song be by us begun,
God help us tell the story,
To sing what our Lord God hath done
Unto His praise and glory.
At Brussels in the Netherlands
Hath He made known His wonders
Through two mere boys, right youthful lads,
Whom He with heav'nly treasures
So richly hath adornèd.

The first right fitly John was named,
So rich he in God's favor;

A Christian true and free from blame
Was Henry, his dear brother.
Out from this world they both have trod;
Their heav'nly crowns they cherished;
Like any pious child of God,
For His Word have they perished.
His martyrs they have become.

Notice how Luther writes not of this event as a tragedy or defeat, but as victory! That through this martyrdom, God has glorified and magnified His Name. It is the theology of the cross - that God does His greatest work by what appears to be the opposite.

And so it is with all that in mind that we come to the Holy Gospel for this day, where we heard Jesus speak *of violence*. [***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.***

Violence. There's certainly no shortage of that in our world today. It is filling our TV and computer screens, from Ukraine to Israel to cities in our own country to the mass shooting just this week in Maine. And not just since the days of John the Baptist, but all the way back to the beginning of creation, when Cain killed his brother Abel because he was jealous that Abel's sacrifice was accepted and his was not. Prophet after prophet sent by God suffered violence, were rejected and killed, the last of which was John the Baptist, who was beheaded by King Herod. Violence surrounds our celebration of the Reformation as St. James of Jerusalem and the apostles Sts. Simon and Jude - all martyrs - were commemorated this past week.

Violence. It is the *modus operandi* of sin and satan. Take what God has created good, and violence it. Good gifts abused and misused, twisted thoughts and desires, life trampled into death. The book of Revelation (ch. 12) told us it would be so, that after the dragon had been cast down to the earth and he could not destroy the male child, the Messiah, he is now making war on the church. The means to his end is *violence*. And when Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, he is including Himself there - for He is the Kingdom of heaven come down to earth who suffered the violence of the cross. *Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered* (Zech 13:7; Matt 26:31). Perfect, thought satan. That's what I'll do.

But while violence is the *modus operandi* of sin and satan, it is not the goal. The goal is to undermine faith; to rob you of your faith. It is to scatter you; to separate you from Jesus. It is to make you doubt God and His words and promises. To make you think either God too weak and not able to help, or that He is able but too unloving to help. To make you believe that God is not really in control. To make you think Jesus is no

Saviour. Look at all the violence, hate, and suffering in our world - you still think there is a God? Look at how your life is going - you still think God cares about you? Look at Christ crucified and dead - no life, no saving there This is how things work in the world. It is a dog-eat-dog world. And you better get on board or you'll wind up the same way - on the wrong end of the violence.

Yet despite all the violence of sin and satan from the very beginning and throughout time, the Church is still here. **Because while you have a crucified Saviour, you do not have a dead Saviour.** You have a Saviour who descended into the violence of our world, took it, suffered it Himself in all its brutality and strength, and then rose triumphant over it. That violence and death not have the last word - He would. That once His lifeless body was taken down from the cross and sealed in the tomb and His opponents said: *Thank God we don't have to hear Him anymore . . .* we did hear Him! His voice of peace, not violence. His voice of forgiveness, not condemnation. His voice of hope, not fear. His voice of life, not death.

That was the voice Luther heard loud and clear from the Scriptures. Every page! That yes, ***all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*** - that was loud and clear everywhere he looked, especially his own heart, so filled with sin. *But that was not the last word!* Yes, ***all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Through the redemption.*** That is, through the payment. That is, through the death and resurrection. That ***in Christ Jesus***, triumphant over sin, death, and the devil, there is life again.

The key is to be ***in Christ Jesus***. The key is not in what you do, how many good works, how many prayers, how faithful - for ***all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*** No hope there! But ***in Christ Jesus***, you have a refuge. You have a fortress - ***A Mighty Fortress!*** - protecting you from sin, death, and the devil. So that though we live in a world of violence, a world where satan is raging against Christ, His Church, and His Christians, and a world up to its neck in sin and rebellion against God and His Word, a flood of sin getting deeper every day . . .

***we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling.***

Because

***The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.***

The Lord of hosts is with us in the flesh and blood of Jesus. Flesh and blood that was not once here but now gone, but is still with us. For it is the flesh and blood not just of a man, but of God. The God who fills all time and space. The God who fills every font, pulpit, and altar with His forgiveness and life. The God who doesn't say from afar: I hope you

make it through the violence! but: I am here to take you through the violence. To take you through it safely. ***Be still, and know that I am God.***

Once Luther heard that voice, that truth, that calmed his troubled mind and gave peace to his troubled heart, that voice became his voice, that truth, his truth. And nothing the Pope, the Emperor, or any opponent could threaten could trump that.

*And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife,
though these all be gone, our victory has been won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth* (LSB #656 v. 4).

That is the truth that also steeled young Hendrik Voes and Jan van Essen when they were not just threatened with violence, but when the fire was lit that would consume them. In Christ Jesus, they were confident. In Christ Jesus, they were safe. In Christ Jesus, they had a life that no one could take away.

And that is the life you have. The life you have been baptized into. The life that is proclaimed to you here, to enter your ears and then your heart. The life in the Body and Blood of your crucified, risen, ascended, and still with you Saviour, which you eat and drink. And satan says: *This? You think this - this water, these empty words, this tiny piece and bread and sip of wine - is going to protect you from me and my hoards, my violence and threats, my sin and destruction? . . . Yup. . . . What's wrong with you? You're insane! You're on the wrong side of history, you can't win. . . . Well, satan, actually, we already have! Jesus' tomb is empty. You're the loser! And nothing you do to me can change that.*

We all believe in one true God . . .

We all believe in Jesus Christ . . .

We all confess the Holy Ghost . . . (LSB #953)

You can't have us. We belong to Him.

That kind of confidence, that kind of faith, that kind of hope, may seem far above what you are able - and you're right! They are! Only the Holy Spirit can work that in you and give that to you, and He does, and has. And so like Hendrik Voes and Jan van Essen, you are different. For you are ***in Christ Jesus. When the world plays the flute, you do not dance, and when the world sings a dirge, you do not mourn.*** Because you are different. You march to the best of a different drummer! You're joy and hope, your confidence and faith, and not here in the things of this world and life - but ***in Christ Jesus***. And ***in Christ Jesus***, in good times or bad times, in violence or peace, you are safe, secure, and loved. You are forgiven and saved. You have hope and a future. Whether you have a death sentence hanging over your head like Luther, flames at your feet like Hendrick and Jan, or any others threats or violence.

500 years ago, two young men who no one had ever heard of before, confessed that faith with their lives in Brussels. Maybe you will, too. Maybe unlike Luther, you will be found

worthy to give your life for this truth. But whether you die a martyr or not, by violence or at peace, you will awaken to life in your Saviour. You will awaken to life with Martin, Hendrick, and Jan. You will awaken to a life that will not and cannot end. ***In Christ Jesus***. Justified by His deeds.

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

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.