

Reformation Day - Like John the Baptist.

Text: Matt 11:11-15

Suggested Hymns:

193T207, 243, 195, 840, 200

1) Luther Was Endowed With The Spirit And Power Of
Elijah

2) Luther Accomplished Great Things In The Kingdom
Of Heaven

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 11:11-15, ¹¹ *“Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”* ¹² *“And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.”* ¹³ *“For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.”* ¹⁴ *“And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.”* ¹⁵ *“He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Although history has properly fixed the 31st of October, 1517, as the beginning of the Reformation, there were before that date a number of men in various countries who are considered the forerunners of the Reformation.

It is hardly conceivable that in the Church of the Middle Ages, which groaned under the supremacy of the bishops of Rome, that there should not have been men whose eyes were opened to the corruption of the Church.

Already in the twelfth century Peter Walden of Lyons, France, recognised the errors of the Roman Catholic Church, and felt constrained to bring the sweet Gospel of Christ to lost souls. He preached with remarkable success; but his followers, known as the Waldensians, were persecuted and killed by the thousands as the result of the most frightful tortures.

In England, John Wyclif directed severe attacks against the godlessness of the monks, spoke emphatically against indulgences, the adoration of relics, and other errors, and translated the Bible into the English language. He, too,

incurred the wrath of the Pope, and when, after his death, in 1384, at the Council of Constance, his doctrines were condemned, the bones of this valiant confessor were dug up and burned.

Through his writings, however, which had become known in Bohemia, another man, John Huss, was moved boldly to lift up his voice against the abuses prevalent in the Church. Since in spite of his excommunication he continued to preach in Prague, he was cited to appear before the Council of Constance, where, because of his refusal to recant, he was condemned to die at the stake.

And to one more forerunner of the Reformation attention should be called. This was Jerome Savonarola, who down in Italy startled the Pope and the clergy out of their security by eloquently denouncing the depravity of the church of his time. As the result of his fearless testimony, he cheerfully met death at the hand of the executioner on Ascension Day, 1498, — fifteen years after the birth of Luther.

But the Reformation has not only had precursors. There have also been people mentioned in the Bible whom Luther in his life and work resembled in a most striking manner. Chief among these was John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, and it was undoubtedly for this reason that the Church chose the text before us as one of the Gospel lessons for Reformation Day.

The subject of our sermon, accordingly, is *“Luther Viewed in the Light of the Activity of John the Baptist.”* May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Like John the Baptist, Luther Was Endowed With The Spirit And Power Of Elijah

Several miles east of the Dead Sea are shown the ruins of the ancient Castle of Machaerus, into which, according to Josephus, Herod had thrown John the Baptist because he had said to Herod, *“It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.”*¹

While in prison, John was allowed to associate with his disciples. Hearing about the miracles which Jesus was performing at this time, he one day sent two of them to Jesus to ask Him, *“Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?”*² In reply to their inquiry, Jesus referred them to His sermons and His works. From these they should judge whether He was the promised Messiah.

After their departure Jesus spoke to the multitudes in highly commendatory terms about the faithfulness of John. The closing words of Jesus' address are contained in our text, "*And if you are willing to receive it* He says, *he is Elijah who is to come.*"

We have in these words a reference to the prophecy of Malachi, ⁵ *Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.*³ He meant, of course, that the future Elijah, was none other than John the Baptist, and that he would appear in the spirit and power of Elijah.

In this respect let us consider in turn Elijah, John the Baptist, and Luther.

Elijah.

To appreciate this, we must take into consideration the conditions in the age of Elijah. It was a time of great apostasy in Israel. Ahab, king of the Northern empire, had married a Phoenician princess, Jezebel by name, who introduced idolatry of a most shameful kind in Israel.

A reformation was greatly needed; but if it was to be of any consequence, it had to begin at the head. The king had to be taken to task, and it fell to Elijah, the servant of God, to announce to Ahab that God would visit the country with a drought that would last three and a half years. Did Elijah hesitate? Did he try to excuse himself in order to evade the unpleasant duty? No; fearlessly he fulfilled his mission, at the risk of his own life. Neither did he cringe before the vicious Jezebel, who was the actual power behind the throne.

Before the end of the drought, a test was made on Mount Carmel as to who the true God was, Baal or the God of Israel. Two bullocks were to be sacrificed on separate altars, and the God who would answer by fire was to be acknowledged as the true God. After hours of prayer to Baal proved futile, fire fell from heaven and burned the sacrifice of Elijah, and the people exclaimed, "*The Lord, He is God!*"

Then followed the massacre of the 450 prophets of Baal — a courageous deed, considering that it only served to increase the rage of the king and especially that of the queen. But Elijah again faced the situation bravely. He knew that the Lord was with him, that he was fighting for a righteous cause.

And once more he was called upon to announce divine punishment to wicked Ahab and his equally wicked wife. It was after Naboth had been innocently stoned to death because he had, for good reasons, declined to sell his vineyard to the king. Again it took courage to face the king and tell him that both he and his wife would die an awful death for having done this great *“evil in the sight of the Lord.”*⁴

Faithfulness in performing his God-given duty, undaunted courage in meeting some of the most difficult situations, a burning zeal for the Lord of hosts, — these are some of the outstanding characteristics of this man, Elijah.

John The Baptist.

With a similar spirit and power John the Baptist was endowed. Like Elijah he was a fearless preacher of repentance. Jesus Himself declared that John was not a reed shaken with the wind.

In the fifteenth year of the rule of the Roman emperor Tiberius, John began to preach in the mountains, rugged country between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, called the Wilderness of Judea. His very appearance attracted attention. He wore a coat of camel's hair, fastened about his waist with a leather belt, and his food consisted of a certain kind of locusts and wild honey, the food of poor people.

But far greater was the attention which his powerful sermons attracted. People of every walk of life came out into the wilderness to hear him. Still it made no difference to John whom he was addressing. He told them the truth without mincing words. He demanded of them a complete change of mind and heart as a condition of receiving his Baptism.

To the dishonest Tax-Collectors, he said that they must take no more money than that which was appointed to them. The Roman soldiers, who were dissatisfied with their wages, were advised not to force money out of the people by violence and black-mail.

But John's courage is evident especially in dealing with the highly respected, self-sufficient, and self-righteous Pharisees. In unmistakable terms they were told, *“Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? **Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance,**”*⁹ *“and do not think to say to*

yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. "5

However, John resembled Elijah also in his dealings with his king, in this case Herod, whom he fearlessly reproved on account of his illicit relations with Herodias, the wife of Herod's brother Philip. Thereby John, of course, also touched a sore spot in the adulterous character of Herodias. Though admired and flattered by the courtiers, her pride was wounded by the voice that condemned her shameless conduct. That voice, "*It is not lawful!*" led to the martyrdom of John the Baptist.

Yet Jesus testifies of him in our text, "*Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist.*" Indeed, John was the "*Elijah who is to come.*" He went before the Lord "*in the spirit and power of Elijah.*"

Martin Luther.

In the light of the person and work of John the Baptist, let us now, view the activity of Luther in whose honour the Lutheran Church celebrates the Festival of the Reformation.

As John, so Luther was endowed with the spirit and power of Elijah. Some people have called him the Third Elijah. Luther came from a humble peasant home. The conditions in the Church under which he grew up were indescribably sad.

Christendom was sighing under the bondage and servitude of the Pope at Rome. In the midst of spiritual darkness, and at a time when it was openly stated that a thorough reformation was the only rescue for the Church, Martin Luther, a relatively unknown Augustinian friar at Wittenberg, appeared upon the scene and, not aware of the extent of his action, caused a great commotion throughout Europe by nailing his famous Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church.

These theses were directed against the sale of papal indulgences, whereby forgiveness of sins could be procured for money.

Who does not hear the voice of John the Baptist in the very first thesis, which reads, "*Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying, 'Repent ye,'*

intended that the whole life of the believers be repentance”? No wonder that the insignificant town of Wittenberg suddenly became famous, just as Bethabara⁶ beyond the Jordan became renowned because it was the site of John’s Baptism.

Pope Leo X, who at first ignored what he considered a mere quarrel among some monks, before long realised that his authority was endangered. Through several letters he demanded that Luther retract what he had written. Luther’s flat refusal to do so, because he would not depart from the Scriptures, placed him into the ranks of bold confessors of the truth. Though the heroism with which he met his opponents, concerning his excommunication, he wrote to a friend, *“I am much more courageous now, since I know that the Pope has become manifest as the Antichrist.”*

Soon after he publicly burned the bull of excommunication. On the day following this act he admonished his students, *“If you will not with your whole heart renounce the kingdom of the Pope, you cannot be saved.”* What undaunted courage!

Then came the memorable year 1521. At the Diet of Worms, called by Emperor Charles V of Germany, Luther was to defend himself before the dignitaries of Church and State. Contrary to the warnings of his friends he cheerfully travelled to Worms, where, in the presence of a large assembly, he declared that, unless his opponents could convince him by clear passages from the Holy Scriptures that he was in error, he could not and would not recant. His concluding words were, **“Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise; so help me God!”**

Such, my fellow-Christians, was the spirit and the power of Luther. Many other instances from his life could be cited illustrating his courage, his fearlessness, his loyalty to the Holy Scriptures, and his defence of the truth, etc.

How much he resembled John the Baptist and Elijah in spirit and in power is clearly demonstrated by his battle hymn *“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”*

He was a man who could sing during another Diet, that at Augsburg, where again his doctrines were attacked,

Though devils all the world should fill,
All eager to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill,

They shall not overpower us,—

A man who could sing like this when all the forces of evil were against him, must not only, like John, be endowed with the spirit and power of Elijah but must also accomplish great things in the kingdom of heaven.

2. Like John the Baptist, Luther Accomplished Great Things In The Kingdom Of Heaven

Concerning the effect of John's preaching the Lord says in our text, ¹² ***“And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.”***

In order to understand these somewhat difficult words, it is necessary to bear in mind that Christ here uses a figure of speech. He is thinking of a fortified city which an army of soldiers is trying to storm. To accomplish this they must use violence, and they will risk their very life to gain their end. This is precisely what happens to the kingdom of heaven.

Luther himself wrote the following fine interpretation of our text, *“Christ says that the Gospel is not preached in vain. There are people who hear it, and so hear it that no power on earth can sever them from the Gospel. They would rather give their life than deny it.”*

These are the people who offer violence to the kingdom of God, who press forward as if they meant to force the door. They are determined to be saved. Their conscience urges them to groan anxiously for the forgiveness of their sins. And there is a great number of them.

Hence, this expression, ‘the kingdom of heaven suffers violence,’ means nothing else than this, that people dearly love the Word of God and prefer it to all earthly possessions.”

That this understanding is correct, we learn from Luke 16:16, where Jesus says,¹⁶ ***“The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it.”***

We might in this connection also think of a group of people standing around a counter waiting for an announcement of a “sale” of goods. How eagerly they press forward and even try to snatch away from some one else the article that is being offered!

So it is with all true Christians to whom the blessings of salvation are offered in the Gospel. They are eager to capture the prize, lest it slip away from them.

Such a zeal for the Word of God was kindled among the Jews by John the Baptist through his sermons. The news of John's preaching travelled swiftly, and the publicity given to him attracted large congregations of hearers.

First came those from the surrounding country, who lived in or near the wilderness. Then the great movement spread in ever-widening circles into Judea. Finally even the haughty disdainful Jerusalem was drawn into the excitement. This was a remarkable testimony for the sermons John had preached.

Matthew⁷ and Luke summarise the contents of those sermons in the words, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”*³ *For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.’ ...*⁵ *Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth;* ⁶ *And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*

John also on two occasions pointed his finger directly at Jesus whose way he was to prepare and said, *“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”*⁸ Thus John in his simple, yet forceful way accomplished great things in the kingdom of heaven, by directing people in all stations of life to the true Messiah and baptising them for the remission of their sins.

The same can be said of Luther. But it was a long road that led Luther to success. How he had to wrestle, before he himself, had taken the kingdom of heaven by force! Thereby he was led into the Scriptures, and the more he studied them, the clearer God's plan of salvation lay before him, the better he was in a position to expound the Holy Scriptures to his hearers and to show them the true way of life.

But here, too, he had to fight many a battle with his opponents. His public debates with Eck, Cajetan, Miltitz, Carlstadt, Zwingli, and others; his reformatory essays on popery, the Lord's Supper, Baptism, the Christian education of children, — to mention but few, — last but not least his Catechism and his translation of the Bible, all these bear witness how the great Reformer stormed the kingdom of heaven by violence.

Is it to be wondered at that a remarkable commotion took place in the Church? With eagerness the people read and study his very first public document, the Ninety-five Theses! How they longed and flocked to hear him preach! His home became a gathering-place for such people who desired to learn the truth.

One city after the other, one country after the other, accepted the pure Gospel, Christian schools began to flourish everywhere, filled with the spirit of the Gospel, the abomination of the Mass was abolished, and the Gospel of Christ the Crucified proclaimed from the pulpits.

We can therefore truthfully apply the words of our Gospel to Luther and say, *“From the days of Luther until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.”* Indeed, like John the Baptist, Luther accomplished great things in the kingdom of heaven.

We, my beloved friends, are the children and heirs of the Reformation. Luther’s influence is felt today in almost all phases of human life. A large measure of grace demands a large measure of gratitude. Therefore, ***Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.***⁹

Let us not only use the pure Gospel with all diligence but also abhor and avoid all ways and means used by false churches to obtain the kingdom of heaven. The Word of God must remain our one and only weapon in our conflict with the Church of Rome, the Reformed, the ecumenical tendencies of our times, and the false deductions of pseudo-scientists.

Our motto must be, *“The Word shall stand despite all foes.”* In the power of this Word we must finally face the last bitter enemy, death. Thus we shall take the kingdom of heaven by force and prove that we are true children of the Reformation, who can cheerfully sing in life and in death, *“The kingdom ours remaineth!”* Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Mark 6:18

² Matthew 11:3

³ Malachi 4:5

⁴ 1 Kings 21:20

⁵ Matthew 3:7

⁶ John 1:28

⁷ Matthew 3:2, Luke 3:3

⁸ John 1:29

⁹ Revelation 3:11