

“Men of Violence”

Liturgical Date: Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist (August 29)

Primary Text: Revelation 6:9-11, St. Mark 6:14-29

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary texts for today, the Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist, are the Epistle from Revelation 6 and the Gospel from St. Mark 6. The title of the sermon is “Men of Violence.”

Today is an interesting day on the Church calendar. Many feast, festival, and commemoration days are a little more upbeat. Some of the days remember people who were martyrs, but this death seems particularly brutal. And even the name of it does not let you escape what we remember today, “Martyrdom”. And in the Roman Catholic Church the name is for this day is even more “in your face” as it is known as “The Beheading of John the Baptist.” Perhaps the only other day that I could compare this to on the Church Calendar is December 28, “The Holy Innocents”, which of course is when Herod orders the male babies of Bethlehem under the age of two slaughtered. And that one falls just three days after Christmas Day so it is a little awkward amongst all the Christmas revelry and joyous hymns. I once filled in for a pastor when that day fell on a Sunday and I can say it was a little difficult crafting that sermon to drop on his congregation during the Christmas season! Maybe you don’t even remember observing the feast day for the Martyrdom of John the Baptist growing up. In fact, it was only added to our liturgical calendar in 2006 with the release of our current hymnal, the Lutheran Service Book.

And one of the graphic and gory details of what we read involves a platter where the severed head of John the Baptist was brought into a dinner party. Yikes! In 2012 when we visited Italy, the closest big city to where we stayed was Genoa.

One day we took a trip into the city, this hometown of Christopher Columbus. We visited the cathedral as one of our stops, it is distinctive church made of black and white striped stone. In the lower chasms below the Cathedral there is a relics area. I must say they had a very impressive relics collection in Genoa. Of course, these relics may not have all been authentic and of course you had to pay fee to see them. And one of the relics they had was a platter they claim actually held the head of John the Baptist. The photo I took of that can be seen on your bulletin cover. As I stared at that platter, knowing what I know from the Bible, it was fascinating in a morbid way.

And that is how it is, isn't it? We live in a world of violence. Most people understand, even many non-Christians, that violence and mayhem are not good. But we have a strange attraction to it. Violent and gory stories are sold as entertainment. There is an old adage in the local news business, "it it bleeds, it leads." Some television channels focus almost entirely on true crimes, many of them brutal in nature.

Yes, we live in a violent world. A world of "men of violence." We are constantly reminded of this. When a person, like John the Baptist, who didn't do anything to deserve a violent end is killed it angers and frustrates us. As does a violent crime against a child. Like we read in Revelation 6 the martyrs under the altar in this vision of heaven call for the justice of God to roll down on the evil doers. We will sing this in our closing hymn as well. Verse 10, "*And they cried out with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?*" We hear of 13 brave members of military and hundreds of civilians blown to bits by a terrorist bomb. "How long, O Lord?" Rising violent crime rates around our nation, including in our Georgia capital of Atlanta. "How long, O Lord?" Millions of unborn lives snuffed out in the womb. "How long, O Lord?" Mass shootings, including in our

schools. “How long, O Lord?” Another senseless murder, seemingly for no reason. “How long, O Lord”. Yes, we live in a violent world, filled with violent men.

And it has been like this since the fall. We see it in our contemporary world. We learn of it from history, which is often a record of “man’s inhumanity to man”, and we read of it in the pages of Scripture. Just in the first few chapters of Genesis we read that Cain killed Abel out of jealousy. God would destroy most of the life on earth in the flood. Genesis 6:11, “*The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence.*” Many on earth over the ages and the saints in heaven have cried, “How long, O Lord?”

So why? Well, we know that earth is filled with men of violence due to the fall into sin. We know that even people who are not that excited about doing horrible things will often do them. Herod orders John the Baptist imprisoned to please his wife, who had it in for John the Baptist as he had preached against their incestuous marriage. Herod goes through with his pledge to Herodias’ daughter in order to save face with his guests. And then we literally get a head delivered on a platter. That is how it goes. Why would we have a day for, even celebrate, an event like this?

Of course, we know that one of the titles of Jesus is the Prince of Peace. Jesus would bring peace between God and man. When He returns on the Last Day, He will bring peace to all the world. With the end of Satan, sin, and death there will be no more bloodshed-no more murders, no more wars. However, we must remember that to achieve this peace, Jesus must go through violence. The most violent event in the history of the world, based on its magnitude and implications. John the Baptist was the forerunner prophesied before the Messiah. His ministry prepared the way for Jesus. And he would proceed his cousin in a violent death. From other Gospels where Jesus speaks of John the Baptist: St. Matthew 11:12,

“And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.” St. Luke 16:16, *“The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it.”* Yes, St. Mark gives us all the gore and details, but the other Gospels point us to the meaning of this.

Yes, many died before John-including faithful prophets speaking the truth from God. Many more would later die. Not only Jesus, but most of the Apostles and countless faithful martyrs through Church History all the way to today. But it is John that leads the way-always the forerunner. His unjust and brutal death prepares us for what we later read in the Gospel accounts concerning the Savior Jesus: the mocking, spitting, scourging, the crucifying.

Why was John even in the position he was to be beheaded? Because he faithfully did the will of Father God. Why was Jesus led to death on a cross? Because He faithfully did the will of His Father. Herod even had some trepidation about all of this. Verse 20 of Mark 6, *“for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.”* Herod is like many people today, even us in our times of weakness. We know what we are hearing is true. But we cave into our weak flesh. When we lack the courage to actually follow God, bad things happen. Once again, murderous leaders throughout the world could not have done what they did without people following through on their orders. No doubt many of their accomplices knew what they were being asked to do was wrong, but they did it anyway. Fear, pride, the desire to please other rather than God can all be powerful motivations to do the wrong thing.

John never caved. Even when some of his own disciples were perplexed. I mean, here is a guy doing everything God told him to do, and look where he ended up? But all the way through when that executioner showed up in his cell, John

remained firm. He would give even his own life to remain faithful to God. Once again, this points us to the even greater example of this, Jesus Christ. He remained faithful. He had committed no crime, actually he had never committed any sin-not even once. Furthermore, Jesus had the power to get out the jam he was in quicker than you could snap your fingers. But He didn't. He remained faithful to the mission His Father had sent Him to do. Taking on the sin of the whole world, the most innocent man ever dying a brutal and painful death. At the hands of "men of violence." Not just those that whipped up false charges and rage against Him. Not just those that pronounced the death sentence and carried it out. But all of those men of violence, including us, that disobeyed any of God's commands. Jesus would experience the most violent event in history, for all those whose sin made that act of violence necessary to save the world.

And in this, God's wrath was fully poured out on sin. And in this, atonement was made. The perfect lamb was given for the sins of the whole world. Not just to cover those sins, but to forgive them. To cleanse us of them. So that in the waters of Holy Baptism, the old sinful man of violence would be drown. So that in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we may be given the very body and blood of Him who suffered violence for us. In faith, we may live by receiving the grace of God. The death of John the Baptist, as horrible and gory as it was, was not in vain. John remained faithful, he continued to point to Christ, he held onto faith even in the face of losing his earthly life. In the end this is what matters. And the death of Jesus was certainly not in vain. From the cross, three days later Jesus would emerge from a now empty tomb. In the end this is what matters. We live in a violent world, among "men of violence." But this is not the end, violence and death do not get the last word. The justice of God has descended and will descend in the Last Days. "O Lord, how long?" In His timing. His perfect timing. From violence and death, God brings life and victory.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.