

Introductory

In LW, as well as LSB, this text is appointed to be read on Advent 3A. Matthew 11: 12 – 15 is appointed to be read on Reformation in TLH. In LW, that text is appointed on Reformation for those using the one-year series. John 8: 31 – 36 is appointed on every Reformation in the three-year series, and this text is appointed for Advent 3A.

Reformation, LSB has the John text as primary and Matthew 11: 12 – 19 as the alternate on Reformation every year. LW and LSB have added this expanded text to be read every third year on Advent 3 while more or less retaining its shortened version on Reformation, here providing context for the words of Jesus about the Kingdom and violence.

Understood correctly and not watered down, this is a text that makes the modern western man uncomfortable. I know this to be the case because whenever I preach on this text, people become uncomfortable. That may be at least part of the reason why LW quietly moved it off Reformation Day. I'm glad that LSB has moved it back in, more or less.

John was a popular preacher – he has disciples - but he is in trouble. The preaching of John, like that of any prophet worth his salt, gets him into trouble with the World. He has told Herod that it's *not* okay for Herod to have married his brother's wife, and William Barclay has a long and very good section explaining how this came to be.

As is generally the case, people do not take well to the preacher telling them who they may or may not marry. This is especially true if the deed has been done because now you're talking about his wife. The only person who likes it less than the adulterous man is the object of his adultery, and we will see the fury of "Philip's wife" later (ch 14).

There seems to be a hesitation among the Lutherans, including Martin Luther, to concede that John the Baptizer was actually asking these kinds of questions and perhaps having doubts about the identity of Jesus, even though it appears that John is asking – through his disciples – questions and perhaps having doubts about Jesus. Doubting John?

While it's not okay for John to have questioned something about Jesus or even doubted, he would not be the first to do so, nor would he be the last. Why would John *not* have questioned what was going on? Have you ever been to prison? Ok, so neither have I, but I do have the dish, so I am aware, and prison was a lot worse in those days than now.

John was Jesus' guy, and yet he finds himself in prison because he was just doing his job, proclaiming the Word, which is Jesus' Word. Matthew spends a lot of time on John, an

indication that he thought that the life and work of John was important. All of chapter 3 – a short chapter to be sure - is about John's work in the wilderness.

His arrest is recorded (4:12), and in this reading, over half of chapter eleven is about this visit of his disciples to Jesus. In chapter fourteen, twelve verses out of thirty-six relate his murder by Herod. If you're keeping score, the equivalent of two chapters out of twenty-eight of Matthew's gospel are about the life and death of John.

John was the connector between the OT and the NT and is sometimes glossed as "the last OT, the first NT prophet." John ushers in the three-year "public ministry" of Jesus, and who witnesses the events that took place at His Baptism, who sees the dove descend from heaven and hears the voice speak, who proclaims Jesus to be the "Lamb of God..."

He knows his place, and he says that he is unworthy to untie His sandal strap. He also gives us the first and perhaps the best picture of what it means to follow. and especially to proclaim Jesus and the consequences of faithfulness to Jesus, for while he may have questioned or doubted he was faithful to the end, and died the martyr's death.

I never used to talk about Islam, but now I talk about Islam all the time, and it is incumbent on us to talk about Islam whenever this text on how the Kingdom of Heaven will be "snatched away" by the evil one comes up. I don't name their religion, nor their prophet, and I surely don't use the name of their false god, but I talk about them.

I generally call it "the religion of violence," and people know what I mean. He tried talking about his god and his religion and he tried to grow his religion by proclaiming the word of that god, and it didn't work. He tried violence in the form of terrorism and conquest, and that worked, and violence continues to be a hallmark of that religion.

When Islam arose in the 7th century northern Africa and much of Europe was mostly Christian. In a very short time Islam spread across the whole of northern Africa and was well up into Spain when its progress was halted by Charles Martel at Tours in 712. That's how Islam spreads. They don't send out missionaries. They send out armies.

While Christians view the violence of war as a by-product of the fall into sin, the violence of warfare is part and parcel of the Islam. But the violence does not stop there. Violence against individuals are used to gain individual converts to Islam, and those who will not convert in Muslim-controlled areas may well be victim of a violent death.

A few short years ago we got a taste of the sort of violence that much of the Church has been experiencing for years, largely ignored by us. It is this sort of violence that Satan used to "snatch away" the Kingdom from individuals and from groups of people. When the Gospel is silenced and the Sacraments are extinguished, so is the Christian religion.

American Christians need to stop focusing on the small picture and become aware of the big picture. While Christians focus on self and their own family, while congregations obsessively try to figure out ways to lure young families through the door, the Islamic threat is knocking on our door, and it's a world-wide problem for Christians.

Textual Notes

2. Earlier in Matthew (4:12), John had been arrested. He had been in the wilderness doing what he did, then he baptized Jesus, then Jesus was tempted, and then John was arrested. Jesus' response was to withdraw to Galilee, to Nazareth, then to Capernaum. He began to preach (4:17) the same thing as John, and He began to call Apostles.

Matthew tells us that John was in prison; “Ο δὲ Ἰωάννης ἀκούσας ἐν τῷ δεσμωτηρίῳ τὰ ἔργα τοῦ Χριστοῦ - John hearing in the prison (about) the works of the Christ.” The noun “prison” has a definite article in front of it. Herod had several palaces, and that's where you would keep a prisoner, and jails and prisons as separate facilities did not exist.

Historian Josephus Flavius knows of Herod and John and talks about his imprisonment in *Jewish Antiquities*. He thinks Herod feared John's influence, and his perceived ability to foment rebellion. “Accordingly, John was sent as a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I already mentioned, and was put to death” [18.119].

Later on (12), Jesus would talk about “violence” done against the Kingdom, and against John. The beginning of the “violence” done against John is that he was put into prison against his will, by the implicit or explicit threat of violence, like the cop who shows up at your doorstep with a warrant, and also a tazer, a gun, and a set of handcuffs.

Barclay points out that John was a sort of free spirit, one who had likely spent his entire life outdoors, who may never have lived in a house, one for whom confinement must have been especially hard. Even for people who have lived in a house, prison is not something you choose, and Christians are imprisoned today in many parts of the world.

While in prison, John was “ἀκούσας – hearing,” an aorist active participle about the works “ἔργα – works” of Jesus, and those works are called the works of “the Christ,” (Messiah), not “of Jesus,” his personal name. The works referred to are the miracles that Jesus has been doing for several chapters, and the immediate context - calling and the sending the twelve - may also be among the “works” or “deeds” to which the Baptizer is referring.

The timing of today's reading is that John has been imprisoned for about two years, and he is about to be executed (14:1ff.) During that time of his imprisonment, Jesus had proceeded to do things that the OT said the Christ would do. John heard about them, and “πέμψας διὰ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ – sent through his disciples” to Jesus.

John had disciples. At this point you may want to define “disciple” and distinguish it from “apostle.” The basic meaning of “disciple” is “learner,” and anybody who follows the teaching of another is a disciple of that person. The word has come down to us, but not commonly; people will talk about a “disciple” of Bill Belichick, for example.

Christians who only hear this word in connection with Jesus are hesitant to use it in other connections because it sounds somehow sacrilegious, but I can be said to be a disciple of Martin Luther when it comes to theology, Thomas Jefferson and Ronald Reagan when it comes to government, and Gregory the Great when it comes to pastoral practice.

3. Hearing about those works that the OT said the Christ would do, John sent some disciples, who “εἶπεν αὐτῷ Σὺ εἶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος, ἢ ἕτερον προσδοκῶμεν – said to him, are you are the coming one, or are we waiting for another?” The pronoun “Σὺ - you” is not needed, but placed there for emphasis, and “the one to come” is a messianic reference.

These men are coming to Jesus at the direction of John, to whom they apparently had some kind of access. They are speaking for John, and not for themselves or for anybody else. Some find this problematic, but it’s not. John is only human, not God, and he’s been locked up for a long time, and are we to think he doesn’t know what will be his end?

What’s problematic is thinking that we somehow need to scour John sinless or beyond having human emotions like doubt. Having said that, the account does not explicitly say that John doubted anything, but why else would you ask the question? John is wondering about the timing and manner of the coming of the Christ, like a lot of people.

4. The answer of Jesus is very simple and to the point; “Πορευθέντες ἀπαγγείλατε Ἰωάννῃ ὃ ἀκούετε καὶ βλέπετε – go, report to John what you hear and see.” The thing about John being in prison is that he could, and no doubt he had heard about the words and works of Jesus, but he was unable to see with his own eyes what Jesus has been doing.

As far as the biblical record goes, Jesus did not begin to do miracles until after the arrest of John. The Water to Wine at Cana is called the “first” miracle. It came after that arrest, and it’s one thing to hear about Jesus doing miracles, and another thing altogether to actually see them with one’s own eyes. The same could be said for hearing and ears.

John has not heard with his own ears or seen with his own eyes, but they have. He tells them look at what you *hear* as well as what you see. Listening, they will hear somebody who indeed who talks like God, but He focuses first not on the ears, but on the eyes; things seen. Looking, they will see that the works that He does identify Who He is.

5. This is the simplest of all syllogism; the things that Jesus is doing are things that the OT said the Christ would do when He came, and Jesus is doing those things, and so therefore He is the Christ. The blind see, the lame walk, and the lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear, and the dead are raised, things He has already manifestly done, and more.

And as far as the ears go; “καὶ πτωχοὶ εὐαγγελίζονται – the poor have the gospel preached (to them).” John B had preached the Gospel, then he was arrested, and then (2:17) Jesus “began to preach” the same thing John preached. The words of John and Jesus are the same words, and what sets Jesus apart is His ability to do miracles.

Not just any miracles. The miracles articulated all appear in the OT in prophecies about the coming of the Christ. The question asked to Jesus by John B is answered by His pointing not to His words – which are the same as John’s – but to deeds He has done. It is those deeds that separate Him from John and everybody else who has ever lived.

6. He articulates those things, and then adds at the end, “καὶ μακάριός ἐστιν ὃς ἐὰν μὴ σκανδαλισθῇ ἐν ἐμοί. – blessed is he who does not lose faith in me.” We recognize the word “blessed,” which has been used by Jesus several times already, most notably in the Beatitudes. It is a state of being for Christians, and non-Christians are not.

The verb σκανδαλισθῇ is translated here and in other places “to take offense.” I don’t know what that translation means, no more than I know what it means when somebody tells me that they are “offended” by something that I did or said. Did I do or say something wrong, or not? Did I sin, or not? Is this important, or can I go now?

The meaning of σκανδαλισθῇ is to cause somebody to lose his faith, which is much more serious than to be offended. It’s the word that Jesus uses later on (18:1ff), when he warns the adults against causing the “little ones” to lose their faith, and how it would be better for them that a millstone was put around their necks and they were thrown into the sea.

Given their history, beginning with his leap when meeting Him for the first time, how is it that John might now lose his faith in Jesus? We need to keep in mind that for us this is all old hat, including this text. For John, this is the first time this has happened, including this text, and it’s all new to him, and he’s trying to get his head around it all.

I have never on account of my being a Christian ever been imprisoned, but I can well imagine that it would be a hard thing, and after two years it was maybe getting old for John. To doubt that John was here having a crisis of faith is to doubt that Jesus was talking specifically about John when He talks about the one who loses faith in Him.

He was, and John was, and it happens to Christians all the time. The thing about the saints – and John B is on the sort list – is that they are not required to be sinless, and none of them are, and all of them were imperfect humans who kept the faith, a description that fits John to a tee. The end of the story is that he kept the faith and died a martyr’s death.

7. This all presumably took place in private. The disciples of John depart to go and report to John what Jesus had said, and “Τούτων δὲ πορευομένων ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγειν τοῖς ὄχλοις περὶ Ἰωάννου – while they were departing, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John,” and He has only good things to say publicly about him.

He reminds them of the John who preached so powerfully that he drew them out into the wilderness to hear him, and then he rhetorically asks if they went out there as tourists to see the sights that you go out into the wilderness to see, or was it to see things that you would not normally see in the wilderness. The rhetorical answer is clear.

8. And what kind of a man did you go out there expecting to see? Did you go out to see a man in “delicate clothing” to see “οἱ τὰ μαλακὰ φοροῦντες ἐν τοῖς οἴκοις τῶν βασιλέων – the delicate clothing worn by those in the houses of kings?” The thing about knowing about clothing in the time of Jesus is that cloth does not last close to two thousand years.

Things like cotton, silk, and purple dye were around at that time, and would have been expensive but not durable. Such cloth was worn by nobility, but not by the common man. Things like wool and camel hair cloth were also around. Both durable and cheap, they would have been avoided by nobility, but common to the common man and John.

9. Rhetorically, no, “ἀλλὰ τί ἐξήλθατε; προφήτην ἰδεῖν; ναί, λέγω ὑμῖν, καὶ περισσότερον προφήτου – but what did you go out, a prophet to see? Yes, I say to you, and greater than a prophet.” Ya, that’s it! The answer to the rhetorical question, a common figure of speech used in the Bible and by us, is always obvious; they went to hear a prophet.

10. Actually, John B was the first prophet in quite some time. John the yard bird is the one spoken of the last time a prophet of God spoke, when Malachi spoke of the “ἄγγελον – messenger” who will “prepare the way” for the Christ. There were prophets, and then there was John, and none of the prophets except John did what John did.

11. He continues, praising John with oxymoron, a figure of speech that we can and should use, but not too much. Sermons that – I think maybe they are modeling Eastern Orthodox preachers – relate oxymoron after oxymoron sandwiched between mysteries make people think that God is one big mystery wrapped around oxymoron.

Among men “born of women,” none are greater than John, except that Jesus, who is also “born of women,” is greater than John. And yet, Jesus continues, the “least” in the Kingdom is greater than John. If John is great, and ordinary Christians are “greater,” then that places us in a very favorable position in the Kingdom!

12. John is not the first prophet to suffer violence or death, and he won’t be the last. In the OT, many prophets suffered much, but that was then, and this is now. This incident, as well as the words of Jesus, address the question of whether or not prophets in the Jesus era will suffer as well. The answer to that question, we now know, is in the affirmative.

That occasion of the arrest of John B seems to have sent a jolt through the heart of the Christian movement, including Jesus, who withdrew from public upon hearing the news. The whole conversation immediately preceding indicate the surprise of John B and perhaps his followers that he had been arrested and was at this time being held in prison.

Arrest itself can be seen as an act of violence, or at least potential violence; there's a reason why the law enforcement officer is carrying a gun, and if you have seen even one episode of COPS, then you know that arrest and violence often go hand in hand. The Jesus Group may have even already suspected the violence coming for the Baptizer.

Still speaking to the disciple of John, Jesus observes; “ἀπὸ δὲ τῶν ἡμερῶν Ἰωάννου τοῦ Βαπτιστοῦ ἕως ἄρτι ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν βιάζεται – from the days of John the Baptizer until now, the Kingdom of heavens has suffered violence.” The verb βιάζεται is common in the literature of the day, but only twice in the NT, here and in Luke (16:16).

The Luke passage is parallelish to this text, Jesus asserting that it is only through violence that the Kingdom can be entered. The paucity of that word in the NT should not surprise. It implies that force or violence will be used if necessary, and we observe that Christians have been, are, and will be on the receiving of violence, not dishing it out.

The verb is in the present passive indicative form. The Church receives violence. Any forced conversions or other violence in our history are anomalies, not the norm. For many religions, particularly Islam, forced conversions and other violence are the norm. You used to have to explain that, but since the days of ISIS – we have seen the visuals.

Such violence has, Jesus says, been going on since “the days of John.” John's arrest is the first act of violence against Christians, with more to come. Next up; Jesus Himself, who will suffer violence in the form of crucifixion, the last in a series of stabs in the back at the hand of His own people. He knew it was coming for Him, and for the Apostles.

All went as sent, and each in his own time suffered violence, and eleven of them obtained martyrdom. Much the same happened to the Seventy second tier Apostles, and it's the story of most missionaries to this day. Since the Seventh Century, you can't hardly talk about this text without talking the religion of violence, much of it against Christians.

Mark Steyn pointed out in *America Alone* just how pervasive Islam is becoming in Western “Christian” countries. North Africa was in many ways the heart of Christianity until Islam made its way east to west, conquering and imposing their religion, their progress stopped only by Charles Martel at Tours, halfway up the Iberian Peninsula.

From the other direction, it took longer moving east to west in the rugged terrain of Anatolia et al, but the invaders progressed until halted at Constantinople in 1452. They kept pushing, violating Hagia Sophia, and by 1683 they were still banging on the gates of Vienna. All along the way, Christians suffered great violence of the worst possible sort.

The west made great advances in science, and subsequently attained military dominance, keeping Islam at bay. Steyn points out how on 9/11 Islam, unable to defeat the west on the battlefield, used our technology against us in a new way. Since then, the violence has become so common that Islamic terrorist attacks on foreign soil hardly make the news.

Steyn also notes the birth rates for Muslims and Christian Europeans and concludes that at the rate those rates are going, Muslims will outnumber the rest and in governmental systems where the majority rules, they will soon rule. Historically, when the Islamic population is in the minority, they play nice, as they do in America.

Historically, when they rule Christianity and all other religions are suppressed. A little over a hundred years ago, Turkey remained 20% Christian. Since then, the Arminian Genocide and a century of constant chipping away has reduced the Christians – today Turkey is over 99% Muslim, and the Christians have a tough row to hoe.

In Pakistan and India, the respective Muslim and Hindu majorities persecute the minority, and Christians in those countries find themselves persecuted by adherents of both of those religions. In the Middle East, Christians have been suffering various forms and degrees of violence for tens of hundreds of years, and it seems worse now than ever.

And, Jesus says, “βιάσται ἀρπάζουσιν αὐτήν – by violence snatch it away.” When I do exegetical work, I do not study every word in depth. It can’t be done because of the constraints of time, and it’s not really necessary. But it is necessary to do a thorough study of key words in the pericope. One of the key words in this text is ἀρπάζουσιν.

That word is the present active indicative of ἀρπάζω, a verb that occurs two other times in Matthew in reference to Satan. Once (12: 29), the word is used to refer to the strong man entering in and “snatching away” one’s possessions. The other time (13:19), it is used of the “evil one” who snatches away a seed that has been sown.

As for John, he uses the word almost every time in the same way, including the sheep narrative in John 10, where he three times uses the word to refer to those who would “snatch away” the sheep from the Good Shepherd. Whether it’s Herod, or the Jewish leadership, or Islam, any violence done against Christians and the Church is from Satan.

It must further be recognized that Satan uses violence to a purpose; he wants to get Christians out of the Kingdom of Heaven and into his fold. The violence that Jesus talks about that will be wrought against the Kingdom of Heaven is for that purpose and for that purpose alone, and often it works, and other times it does not.

13. Jesus then asserts; “πάντες γὰρ οἱ προφῆται καὶ ὁ νόμος ἕως Ἰωάννου ἐπροφήτευσαν – all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.” We note that the primary meaning of “prophesy” in the Bible is one who proclaims God’s Word. A “false prophet” is one who claims to proclaim God’s Word, but in fact is proclaiming something different.

The construction of the sentence here indicates that there is a Segway from the Word proclaimed in the OT to the Word proclaimed in NT times by John et al. John is seen by Jesus as a continuation of the OT. I am among those who think that John was, in fact, a bridge prophet, the last OT and the first of the NT prophets.

John is in prison and unable to proclaim the Word and that he's going to die (Ch. 14), but already (Ch. 10) twelve more have been chosen to take his place in the prophetic office. John will be gone, but twelve are in position already to carry on his work. They will be the first generation after John and Jesus to carry on the work of proclamation.

They will write the Bible and pass the Faith on to the generations who follow, who will be guided by their writings, passing the Faith down to the next generation, then comes Martin Luther, who famously went back to the Bible and used it. Faithful pastors today stand in that same prophetic/apostolic office preaching repentance to those in their day.

14. And speaking of OT prophets, Jesus declares “καὶ εἰ θέλετε δεῖξασθαι, αὐτός ἐστιν Ἠλείας ὁ μέλλων ἔρχεσθαι – if you want to receive it, he is Elijah about to come.” To get the full effect of that statement, we need to understand the common Jewish belief that before the coming of Messiah, the OT Prophet Elijah would return.

So was John Elijah, or not? No, he is not. When we speak of this or that athlete as “the second coming” of a previous athlete, we don't mean that LaBron is actually Magic. In fact, sports talk guy can leave out “the second coming” and just go with something like “Mike Trout is Ted Williams,” and we get the comparison. So yes, John is Elijah.

15. People ask that question today, especially when seeking errors and contradictions in the Bible, which is like finding a needle in a haystack, except there's no needle. Perhaps such was going on even as Jesus spoke, because He chases that statement with “ὁ ἔχων ὦτα ἀκουέτω – the one having ears, hear!” present imperative command to listen.

Later on in Matthew, He makes another reference to John as “Elijah (who) has already come” (17:12), which Matthew tells us the disciples understood to be John (v. 13). He is comparing John to Elijah and saying that the prophetic status of John is the same as that of Elijah, which was fundamentally probably why it would have been a hard saying.

Elijah was universally recognized in Judaism as one of the top three or four prophets of all time. John not so much, at least not in that day. He was popular and well-known, and they flocked out into the wilderness to him, but he was no Elijah. But not, two millennia later he has indeed been seen by modern Christians to have earned that comparison.

Of this saying, Ellicott says

The formula, which meets us here for the first time, is one which our Lord seems to have used habitually after any teaching, in parable or otherwise ([Matthew 13:9](#); [Mark 4:9](#)), which required more than ordinary powers of thought to comprehend. To take in the new aspect of the coming of Elijah required an insight like that which men needed to take in, without an interpreter, the meaning of the parable of the Sower.

Law/Gospel

Now/Not Yet – The Church has always and continues to suffer much as we, like John, impatiently await the return of Christ in glory. The time is soon, but not now, something that we should continue to talk about during this Advent Season. John had to wait, and in fact had to face death, and we have to wait and face death. Probably.

Death/Life – John is about to die. Even for the Christian the thought of death may be troubling and cause doubts and fear, especially if he is young. We have all heard elderly people in nursing homes wondering why God hasn't taken them to heaven yet. Because Jesus died and rose again, we also can be confident that we will rise after death. We have already seen this, as Paul says in Romans 6, in our Baptisms, where we were buried and raised with Christ.

Violence/Peace – We Americans and the Europeans are just a little bit spoiled when it comes to violence against Christians; we don't experience it. Historically this has not been the case, and it is not the case in most parts of the world today. Sermons with this theme end up talking about violence against Christians historically and in other parts of the world today. It's good for Americans to be reminded how good we have it compared to them, and to feel compassion for their fellow Christians in other times and places, and of the lasting peace that we have with them that will be perfected in heaven.

Persecution/Rest – I hesitate to allow Americans to say that they are "persecuted" for the faith because I don't want to cheapen the severe persecutions that we just talked about, but it is getting more and more difficult to be a Christian in our country. Faithful pastors who proclaim the kind of thing that John proclaimed to Herod may not end up beheaded, but they may end up without a job. Our Sabbath rest is in Christ, and our final resting place will be the bliss of heaven.

Sermon Titles

Doubting God

John the Jail Bird

The Kingdom of Heaven and Violence

He is Elijah to Come

Hymns

Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word – LSB 655

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God – LSB 656 or 657

Preserve Your Word, O Savior – LSB 658

Onward, Christian Soldiers – LSB 662

O Little Flock, Fear Not the Foe – LSB 666

Rise! To Arms! With Prayer Employ You – LSB 668

Behold a Host Arrayed in White – LSB 676

For All the Saints – LSB 677

Anything from the *Advent* section

Nothing from the *Christmas* section

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, Iowa

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