

Matthew 9:1–8 (Reformation obsvd.)  
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.  
Trinity Luth. Ch., Frankfurt  
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Today is a day of celebration. We celebrate the Reformation of the church that God worked through Martin Luther over 500 years ago. At the same time, we recognize how we are always in need of reformation, repentance, and returning to the truth set forth for us in Scripture. On the one hand, we sing “A Mighty Fortress,” the battle hymn of the Reformation. We celebrate victory! On the other hand, we sing “O Lord, Look Down From Heaven, Behold,” as a reminder that true Christianity does not make us popular. We look around and see God’s natural law perverted in the world and in the church. We see the truths of Scripture denied on every hand and it looks like defeat. The Reformation is both a day of joyous celebration and a day of sobering reality as we recognize that God’s Kingdom is always suffering violence and the violent take it by force.

As a matter of course, calls to reform, to repent and return to first principles are always met with resistance. And so this morning we focus on the first part of our Gospel text: “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” Prophets, like John the Baptist, call for a return to God’s Word, but people want to go their own way. And so prophets are more often resisted than not, even violently. True prophets are considered narrow-minded, hard headed and intolerant because true prophets proclaim nothing but God’s Word. The prophets of God point us to God’s Kingdom, the

Kingdom of Heaven, which comes to us in Jesus Christ. But God's Kingdom is exclusive. You cannot hold dual citizenship in the Kingdom of God and other kingdoms of your choice.

Man's sinful nature hates this total commitment to the Kingdom of Heaven, and so man seeks to destroy God's Kingdom and God's messengers, the prophets. The prophets of God are often not accepted by those to whom they are sent. The message of repentance is too disturbing. People prefer to live according to their own standards rather than according to God's standards. That's why anytime God sends His prophets to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven, the violent rise up and try to crush God's Kingdom by crushing God's messengers. Those who remain faithful will always be small and persecuted, but that is exactly how our LORD works. God accomplishes His will through what is considered small, persecuted and weak by this world's standards. Our victory ends up looking like defeat, because God's power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9).

John the Baptist was the last of the Old Testament prophets, the "Elijah who is to come." In the last chapter of the last book of the Old Testament, the LORD says through the prophet Malachi: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes" (Mal 4:5). Just like prophet Elijah, John the Baptist preached a message of repentance: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." That was John's message for all the people and in particular for those in high positions of authority. And just like Elijah, John was persecuted for his message. John the Baptist preached against the religious leaders. He called the Pharisees and Sadducees a "brood of vipers" (Matt 3:7). John also preached against the political rulers of the day. He was put in prison for calling out sexual misconduct in Herod's household, and later beheaded by Herod on a whim. John the Baptist called out sin. But many did not repent

of their sins. Instead, the rulers tried to stifle John's message. The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.

The prophet John the Baptist preached repentance in light of the coming kingdom of Heaven. That Kingdom actually did come in Jesus Christ. After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee proclaiming the Gospel of God and saying: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:14–15). Repent. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, including you. Turn away from that sin. Turn to God. Believe in the Gospel. Trust the good news: God became man to live a perfect life in your place and to die for your sins. Yes, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But all people are also justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. You, too, are justified. God considers you righteous for the sake of the life and death of Jesus Christ. In Baptism, God change your heart and your mind and makes you into a new person.

Jesus proclaimed the good news of what He came to do, the good news of the Kingdom of God. And what did Jesus get for it? Just like John the Baptist, Jesus was killed for proclaiming a Kingdom that is not of this world. The religious and political leaders banded together to silence the proclamation of God's Kingdom. The religious leaders feared losing their control and their traditions. The political leaders feared an uprising. John the Baptist and Jesus were both killed for preaching repentance and the Kingdom of Heaven. The crowds came out against Jesus as against a robber, with swords and clubs (Matt 26:55). Jesus was captured, crucified, and killed, just as the prophets had predicted. The Kingdom of Heaven suffered violence as the violent tried to take the kingdom by force. But what sinners meant for evil, God meant for good. The violence of the cross made peace between God and man.

So it was in the days of the prophets, in the days of John the Baptist and Jesus, and so it continues until the end of the world. The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force. Today we celebrate Reformation Day, the anniversary of Martin Luther's nailing of the 95 Theses onto the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The church in Luther's day was basically claiming to sell the free forgiveness of sins. The goal was not to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins, resulting in new life and salvation. No, the goal of the church in Luther's day was to exact more revenue to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther's concern was basically a pastoral concern. His people were living with a false sense of security. Rather than repenting of their sins and turning to the Gospel of free forgiveness in Jesus Christ, they trusted in their works, especially their financial works. This misguided understanding of repentance is why the first of Luther's 95 Theses reads: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Repentance is not a one-time exchange. It is a new life in Holy Baptism, where we daily recognize our sin, confess it, and turn to our Savior from sin, Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther was a true prophet who preached true repentance and the forgiveness of sins in Jesus to the dismay of the religious and political authorities. Of course, church leadership became upset because someone was threatening their major source of income. They also stood to lose credibility in the eyes of the faithful. And soon the political rulers became upset as well. Luther's stance would divide Christian Europe, making the Holy Roman Empire more prone to attack from the outside. After Luther refused to take back his writings at the Diet of Worms in 1521, he was declared an imperial outlaw. Anyone could have killed Luther without any consequences. A number of Luther's followers suffered such a fate. The Kingdom of Heaven suffered violence as the violent tried to take it by force.

The last four of Luther's 95 Theses tie the Reformation movement closely to our Gospel Lesson this morning: Thesis 92. "Away, then, with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, "Peace, peace," and there is no peace! (Jer 6:14). Thesis 93. Blessed be all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, "Cross, cross," and there is no cross! Thesis 94. Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, death and hell. And finally, thesis 95. And thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace (Acts 14:22)."

False prophets will always proclaim peace, but only a peace that the world gives; not the peace of God that passes all understanding. The world offers peace at the price of compromising on God's Word. But the prophets of God proclaim the peace that comes in the cross of Christ. A true prophet preaches "cross, cross," though the cross has already been born for us. Jesus Christ paid for our sins upon the cross. The cross means that Jesus suffered for our sins, and so we no longer see the cross as an implement of torture, but as a glorious sign of our Lord's victory over sin, death, and Hell. Our peace comes in the cross of Christ alone. Yes, we pass through suffering and crosses in this life because the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force. Yet it is through many tribulations that we enter the Kingdom of God. For a time the world will rejoice as we weep and lament, but our sorrow will turn into joy (John 16:20). What the world means for evil, God will use for good.

Still today the Church is called to preach the same message: "Repent and believe the Gospel; the Kingdom of Heaven is here." But that's a message the world does not want to hear. Sinners prefer to remain in their own self-made kingdoms where they have power and control. And so the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force. When the Church remains faithful to God's Word, when Christians remain faithful to our King, Jesus

Christ, then we, too, become targets of the unbelieving world and the powers of Hell. But “take heart,” Jesus tells us, “I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Wherever God’s Word is preached, taught, and lived, the Kingdom of Heaven comes, no matter how small and prone to failure it appears. The Holy Spirit will always work through the Word to gather a people for Himself, a little flock, though surrounded by wolves. The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force, yet God continues working through what is small and despised in this world—God continues working through us, His Church—for the building of His eternal Kingdom. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.