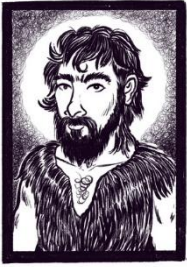


Living on the of Threshold of a New Era

Matthew 11:11 – 15



11 Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered 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 accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. 15 He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

When I sit in a doctor's waiting room, time crawls at a snail's pace, and it feels as though it has come to a standstill. Yet at other times, time flies, and I ask myself: "How can time pass so quickly?" Time, it seems, is more than just a mathematical succession of months, days, hours, and minutes. We also have a relationship with time—and the nature of that time changes depending on the relationship we have with it.

It is no different in the Bible. There are specific periods that differ completely from one another in their essence. There is, for instance, the time of Adam and Eve before the Fall; qualitatively, that was a completely different era from what followed. Then came the time of waiting for the Messiah, who would set everything right. And then the time following the Resurrection—the era in which we find ourselves today. The time of John the Baptist was also a unique period. It lay precisely on the threshold between the waiting for the Messiah and His actual arrival. John is the last of the great prophets; he stands firmly rooted in the Old Testament, yet he points beyond that foundation toward Christ. For this reason, Jesus calls him the greatest of all the prophets. John touches upon the new reality found in Christ, yet he has not yet entered that Kingdom himself. That is why Jesus says: although he is the greatest among all the prophets, he is lesser than the least in the Kingdom of God.

John is a remarkable figure because he lives right on that threshold between the old era and the new. In doing so, he serves as a model for us as well, for we can experience within ourselves the two eras in which he lived. On the one hand, we are baptized and stand firmly upon the salvation granted to us in Christ; on the other hand, we sense that sin is still at work within and around us, weighing us down. From the world we live in, we ask just as John did: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" Just as John saw both worlds from his prison—the world of doubt and the world of sight—so too do we see these two worlds in our faith. Do you know the feeling? You sit in church, hear the Gospel, and in your mind, you know: This is right. This is true. And yet, you go home, and the worries are still there. The family conflict remains. The doctor's diagnosis remains. And you ask yourself: "Where is God in all of this? I prayed, and nothing changed." Or perhaps even more starkly: A person struggles for years with the same sin. He knows he is forgiven. He even believes it. And yet, he falls again and again. He asks himself: "Is this really freedom? Is this the life Jesus meant?" This question of living the Christian life between these two worlds is one of the most important questions we face as Christians.

We ask, as John did: Where is God's kingdom actually at work? And we need to be reminded again and again: God's kingdom is close enough to touch!

Christ wants to draw our attention to this vital aspect of the Christian life. That is why He speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven suffering violence. By this, He means precisely this: Life as a Christian is not always a scenario where Jesus has the crowd sit down and physically, tangibly satisfies everyone with a little bread and fish. In reality, it happens more often that we fail to recognize this Jesus in our lives at all. I think of someone who loses his job. He prays. And yet, initially, he finds no new position. For months. And he asks: "Has God forgotten me?" Or a mother who prays for her child, yet the child turns away from God. Or someone living in deep loneliness, even though they belong to the congregation and sit here every Sunday. John's question is our question: "Was that really all there was to it?" Jesus wants to draw our attention to these matters and reveals to us the mystery of the Kingdom of God. When Jesus triumphed over sin, death, and the devil, he did not do so with a brandished sword and a banner of victory, but rather under the sign of weakness on the cross. And it is in this same ambiguity that we experience his victory in our own lives. Perhaps John, too, had expected something different

when he spoke of the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Yet things turned out differently. John had to experience this firsthand when he was unjustly thrown into prison and ultimately executed. The fact that Jesus and John were put to death by the powers of the state does not represent a victory of their enemies over them. On the contrary: all of this is part of God's holy plan for bringing his purpose to fulfillment.

Jesus addresses a John who, surely filled with doubt, asks from prison: "Was that really all there was to it? Where, then, is the power of God manifested through his Messiah? And what can he do about my fate?" Jesus engages in a similar way with his disciples, who want to prevent him from going to the cross.

The temptation to cast Jesus as a reformer or transformer of the world remains with us to this day. We long for Jesus to become active in our lives in a way that is more convincing, more tangible to the senses, and more powerful. The message has remained the same. Jesus reveals himself to us in the reflection of the cross. On the one hand, the cross represents ultimate failure; on the other, the greatest victory. We stand at this threshold just as John did. We exist between two eras: between the waiting and the coming of the Messiah in all his fullness.

John stands at the threshold, reaching out his hand to us who live in a vastly different time. Because he lives at the threshold, Jesus identifies him as one who embodies the spirit of Elijah. Living at the threshold of eras means that times which do not naturally belong together suddenly converge and become simultaneous: the time of the "not yet" and the time of what is already fulfilled. When we hear Jesus' words today, when we partake of the Lord's Supper, and when we are baptized, this reality of the Kingdom of God breaks into our lives. We come into direct contact with God through Jesus. And yet, we live in this world. Our aging bodies make themselves felt, reminding us that all things are fleeting. And when we face a terrible fate, it feels as though the entire world is collapsing. At the beginning, I said that time is more than just a division into minutes and hours. For us Christians, time is more than that because we are encompassed and embraced by a completely different kind of time—the time found in Christ. A child in the womb knows only the tiny world of the womb. What it cannot sense is the existence of a vastly different world outside—one that surpasses even the mother and everything around her. That is what it is like when God's time breaks into our time. We still live in our world. The many human stories that exist in our world touch us and do not leave us indifferent. Yet, through the Word of God that reaches us, we connect with a far greater world—one that casts our own small world in a completely different light.

It is like the light streaming through a church window. The window itself does not shine; it is not the source of the light. But through it, the light of day enters and transforms the space. Our faith is like that: we are not the source. We do not shine of our own accord. We live in the reflected light of the Cross, of the Resurrection, and of the glory yet to come.

Jesus' sermon to John and his disciples was delivered in the midst of a crisis. Jesus' word to us is likewise a sermon preached among the graves. His words ring out amidst the graves of our disappointed hopes, in the midst of our despondency, and in the midst of our sinfulness.

Jesus' sermon is preached among the graves. And it tells us:

"God has a word for you. And it is not the final word. The final word is yet to come."

Amen.