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If you are willing to receive it, Jesus says, John the Baptist is Elijah who is to come. This is a hard saying, which is why Jesus says, “He who has ears to hear let him hear.” By saying this, Jesus is affirming that John the Baptist is the prophet foretold by Malachi through whom God spoke, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me... Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes” (Malachi 3:1; 4:5).

This saying of Jesus is especially difficult for the crowds to hear. You see, by identifying John the Baptist as Elijah, Jesus is identifying himself as the LORD, the God of Israel. This means that everyone needs to listen to Jesus. It means that everyone is accountable to Jesus. It means that what Jesus says to the crowds about their sin and their need to repent is true. It means that Jesus is the only source of their salvation. It is hard to say and believe that Jesus is the Lord, because this requires us to give up our own understanding of what true religion is supposed to be, and instead listen to Jesus. We must listen to Jesus, even when he says things that are hard, like that he is the bread of life and that his flesh and blood are given as true food and drink, availing for eternal life for all.

It is hard to give up our own versions of who Jesus is *to us* and, instead, actually listen to what *he* has to say. And for this reason, it is hard to listen to the prophets whom he sends. But those who have ears to hear, let them hear. Because faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ. Faith is strengthened by sitting at the feet of our Lord. Whether you are learning straight from the Apostles and Prophets themselves as you read your Bible at home, or you hear God’s unworthy servant preach and teach it to you in the assembly of the saints, your faith is strengthened by hearing the voice of your Shepherd. This voice is foolishness to those who reject him, but it is as sweet as honey to those who believe. So those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

When Jesus tells us to hear with our ears, he is calling us away from idol worship. Psalms 115 and 135 describe those who worship idols. Their idols have eyes, ears, noses, and mouths, but they can’t see, hear, smell, or speak. Those who worship them become the same way. Those who rely on works of their own hands or on the things of this world become just like their deaf and mute idols. They become unable to hear the truth at all. Jesus is calling us out of this idol worship. He first directs us to listen to his prophets who went before him. Consider what they taught. Because they were all pointing to the coming of the Lord Jesus himself.

Jesus says that since the day of John the Baptist the Kingdom of Heaven has endured violence and that the violent take it by force. Certainly, the church of Christ suffers violence and scorn from her enemies. Those who shut their ears to the prophets of God respond with scoffing and vehemence. They are like the people in the days of Noah. God looked down and saw that the earth was filled with violence (Gen 6:11). The Prophet Isaiah records that God looked down at his vineyard, Jerusalem, for it to bring forth good fruit, but instead he saw bloodshed and an outcry (Isaiah 5:7). He sent his prophets, and the people did not hear them. Instead, they responded with scoffing, rebuke, sneering, and violence.

Violent people have been trying to overthrow the church of God throughout history. The church’s fiercest enemies come from within. Athaliah, the wife of the king of Judah and mother of several descendants of David, tried to kill all her children and wipe out the bloodline leading

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to Christ. Now, many faithful preachers and congregations have suffered violence for confessing that Christ is the only way to salvation, that our works cannot save us, but that our salvation only comes from the words of him who died, rose, and says to us, “Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.”

Yes, the church suffers violence. Yes, people try to overthrow the church through violence. Look at all the churches today, which have been overtaken by those who speak lies, who say that Jesus isn't the only way to salvation, who promote the murder of unborn babies, the mutilation of men and women, and other wickedness. But we should pay attention to our Lord's words. The violent take it by force. There is a greater force than the lies of this world. There is a greater force than the force of those who have lots of power and influence in politics or in popular culture. A much greater force than all of this is God's Word. This is how we hold onto God's kingdom. It is only through faith in his Word. So those who have ears to hear, hear the words of Christ.

Christians who, with ears to hear, hear the voice of Jesus. They hang on to the promise of his Kingdom with the force of the Spirit, who is stronger than any force of darkness. They listen to the warnings of Elijah, John, and any minister whom God sends to preach his pure Word. And they therefore take great comfort in the righteousness that the prophets proclaimed in the forgiveness of sins.

This is why God sent his servant, John, to preach a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Now, John is not a reincarnation of Elijah. There is no such thing as reincarnation. Rather, John comes in the same spirit and conviction that Elijah came. Elijah did not care about how sensitive people were to the truth. He wasn't concerned about the sentimental attachment people had with their household gods. He preached against idolatry, letting the chips fall where they would fall. He mocked the false god Baal and his prophets. He was not afraid to speak the truth. After all, it is only the truth that will set you free, not the false worship of the world.

But the truth hurts. It's offensive. If John the Baptist would have just walked around saying, “God loves you and has a plan for you” he would not have been hated. Had he shown tolerance or had an open mind toward other kinds of life-styles, then he would not have preached against Herod's adultery, and he would have therefore kept his head. But John the Baptist was sent in the spirit of Elijah, and you would do well to embrace this fact.

Like the prophets before him, John endured scoffing and violent persecution from the enemies of the truth. But those who received by faith the promise of that truth were set free from sin, called children of God, and strengthened in the Spirit. Those who heard and believed the Word of the Spirit held on forcefully by faith against all attacks, whether to the body or to the soul.

This is how the church has always lived. God raises up faithful men to preach and teach his truth, and those who hear and believe confess this truth with zeal and courage. This is why we observe Reformation Day. Reformation Day isn't about political or social justice. It is not about German Nationalism. It isn't even about drinking beer. The Reformation is about hearing the truth of God's Word and believing it.

The angel that was prophesied of in Revelation 14 preached an eternal gospel. He said, “Fear

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God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water” (Rev. 14:7). This is exactly what Martin Luther preached. Fear God. That is, care about how God thinks about you. Fear his wrath. Understand that your own righteousness pales in comparison to the righteousness that God requires of you. Acknowledge that before God’s hour of judgment there is nothing within you that will stand as worthiness before him. But give all glory to God. That is to say, give credit to his merit and his salvation. Boast not in your own works, but in the work of Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Giving glory to God simply means trusting only in him. It is as we sing in the hymn:

All blessing, honor, thanks, and praise
To Father, Son, and Spirit,
The God who saved us by His grace;
All glory to His merit.

Worship him. That is, listen to his Word. Hear him, and cling to his Word as forcefully as a child drinks the milk his mother gives him. Drink from the water of life, which he pours out on you through his grace. Eagerly eat his body and blood, which alone bought for you forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. With ears to hear, cling to the truth, which alone sets you free.

As the church we are in this battle together. If your pastor is ridiculed and slandered for preaching and teaching against false doctrine, then you are being ridiculed and slandered as well. If you see your brother tempted to give into the lusts and wicked desires of the world, then you endure that attack with him when you confess the truth. Children are taught more and more these days that they should respect other religious views. Men and women, both young and old alike, are tempted to give up their chastity and to pervert that which God has given only to marriage. All Christians, regardless of age, sex, education, intelligence, or ethnicity, are attacked by the devil, the world, and their own sinful flesh to doubt the faithfulness of God toward them. But the church confesses the truth of the Scriptures, the truth of the gospel, because it is upon the truth that she even exists, and it is with this truth that we comfort one another.

When you confess this truth together and to each other, then you strengthen each other. When you confess together that your Baptism wasn’t merely a symbolic washing or dedication you made for God, but the very washing in which the Holy Spirit gave you new birth and new life through Jesus Christ – one Baptism for the remission of sins – then you restore one another in the true Christian faith. When you confess that the Lord’s Supper is not only bread and wine, but the very body and blood of Jesus whereby he made full satisfaction for your sins, then you show forth together the death of Christ until he returns. When you feel the guilt of your sin, and you know that you have earned God’s eternal wrath, you are comforted by zealous conversations about Jesus. By his death in weakness, by his bearing of God’s wrath, he was strong to save you from all condemnation. When, with ears to hear, you listen with your fellow saints to the voice of your good Shepherd, you rush together into his Kingdom with the strength of the Holy Spirit who spoke by the prophets. You take the Kingdom by force.

So, dear friends in Christ, encourage one another during this Reformation feast. When you get together to hang out and visit, talk theology. Don’t be timid about the truth. Instead, be zealous and strong through faith in Christ. Don’t be ashamed to talk about that pure doctrine, which

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identifies you as the true church of Christ. Talk about the righteousness of Jesus, which is credited to you fully through faith in his blood. Read Luther's Catechism, which summarizes the truth of the Bible so well. By encouraging one another in God's Word, you strengthen each other as you rush into the Kingdom of Heaven together. God gives you ears to hear and believe the truth that sets you free from all sin and condemnation. Therefore, by living with a good conscience, you worship in the Spirit and truth, not in falsehood. By confessing this truth that Jesus came to fulfill, you do not swear deceitfully, but as the Psalmist says, you will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of your salvation (Psalm 24:4-5). God grant it always in Jesus' name. Amen.