

1. It's not that big of a deal, is it? Sure, Pharaoh tried to kill our sons. He made us make brick without straw, but at least we know where our next meal is coming from. Why seek freedom? We have fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic.

The Lord gave Moses the difficult task of speaking truth to power. Moses was told to go to Pharaoh, the Egyptian king, who was considered a god in the eyes of many. God told Moses to go to Pharaoh and ask that the Israelites be released from captivity. You know, Moses, the one who murdered an Egyptian and fled for his life? The one who Pharaoh could execute if he didn't even so much as like his haircut.

“Let my people go.” Again and again Moses and Aaron went into the court of Pharaoh and requested release. They risked life and limb to stand before this king. And if it weren't for the miraculous intervention of the Lord again and again, the Israelites would have been exterminated by the Egyptians.

“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” The devil and his demonic horde will stop at nothing to exterminate God's Church on Earth. This might mean the overt attacks from those on the outside: a Pharaoh who enslaves and subjugates, a Nero who makes Christians into cat food in the coliseum, or even a modern dictator who sends Christians to a Gulag.

2. It's not that big of a deal, is it? Sure, David may have impregnated someone else's wife and sent the husband off to the frontlines of battle to be killed. But after all, it's good to be the king, isn't it? He works hard, harder than any of us. He deserves the rules to be bent in his favor from time to time. We all sin, why upset a ruler who is otherwise good and faithful?

The Lord gave Nathan the difficult task of speaking truth to power. Nathan was given the unenviable task of telling David he had sinned. Such bad news could cause David to lose his head, and Nathan would then subsequently lose *his* head. Nathan knew this and planned his words carefully. He told King David the story of a rich man who had an entire flock of sheep yet chose to steal a poor man's lamb to feed an out-of-town guest. David was outraged and demanded that that rich man be put to death.

“You are the man,” Nathan said. The trap was sprung. David could have sent Nathan to the executioner, but David repented. Although his actions did have negative consequences, because David asked for forgiveness, he himself did not die. The Lord forgave David.

“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” The devil and his demonic horde will stop at nothing to exterminate God's Church on Earth. This might mean subtle attacks from the inside: a pastor or leader who acts in an

ungodly, selfish, or abusive fashion. Sin is a cancer, and you don't manage it, you kill it. Sin needs chemotherapy, not a coverup. How many scandals in the Church would have been much less horrible if the first person who learn of the sin nipped it in the bud rather than hide it? How many souls have been destroyed by Christian leaders turning a blind eye to abuse?

3. It's not that big of a deal, is it? Sure, the Law said not to take a wife of a different religion, but Ahab was just being inclusive by marrying Jezebel of Sidonia. Yeah, King Ahab set up an altar to Baal, but it's not like he outlawed worshipping the true God, right? Life is all about choices, why not give the people some variety and freedom?

The Lord gave Elijah the difficult task of speaking truth to power. In fact, the first we hear of Elijah, he is standing before Ahab saying, "It ain't gonna rain no more." Quite an insult to the worshippers of Baal. After all, Baal was considered to be the god of storms. After three and a half years of famine and drought, Elijah finally came back to Ahab. Ahab greets Elijah accusingly: "**Is it you, you troubler of Israel?**"

"And [Elijah] answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals." Elijah is saying, "Don't blame the referee when you're the one who's fouled out." Elijah challenges 450 the prophets of Baal to a duel. Your god against mine. The Lord wins the day and the prophets of Baal are defeated. However, Queen Jezebel doesn't like this, and Jezebel runs Elijah out of town for fear of his life.

"From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force." The devil and his demonic horde will stop at nothing to exterminate God's Church on Earth. Sometimes this comes in the form of a well-meaning compromise of teaching or practice. Pastor, if we set out that pro-life display outside, somebody might leave our church! If the Tribune publishes your letter to editor, we might get a reputation of being the intolerant congregation in town.

The more we try to broaden the definition of Church to include everybody, the more we run the risk of ceasing to be Church altogether. Ahab and Jezebel thought they were simply being more inclusive, but Elijah as God's spokesperson saw through that ruse.

4. It's not that big of a deal, is it? What are you doing, John? Why call the religious hot shots a brood of vipers? What did they ever do to you? Did you have to get Herodias angry at you? Sure, she divorced her half-uncle, Philip, and she got married to her other half-uncle, Herod, but who's to judge? We're not in ancient Israel anymore, these are modern times!

The Lord gave John the Baptist the difficult task of speaking truth to power. His job was to call people to repentance. He preached to convince people to turn from their sins and wrongdoing. In our Gospel text for today, John the Baptist is already beheaded. But we get a flashback. 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.” The way Mark tells it, John the Baptist wasn’t on death row, he was in protective custody. Herod wanted to keep John safe from his wife.

“**And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her.**” One night at a party, Herod gathers the who’s who of Galilee. Herodias’ daughter comes in and does a dance. Maybe it was the wine or maybe it was the guests, but he makes an offer that he shouldn’t have. The daughter demands John’s head. A stronger man could have changed his mind, but Herod’s reputation was more important than John’s life.

“**From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.**” The devil and his demonic horde will stop at nothing to exterminate God’s Church on Earth. Sometimes this comes in the form of timid men and women not speaking up when they should. Lutheran Pastor Martin Niemöller wrote regarding his time in Nazi Germany: “First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.” The Lord grant us the power to speak out against evils in our own day and age.

5. It’s not that big of a deal, is it? Sure, the world we live in is filled with sin, death, and sorrow, but that’s just life, right? We get a few decades on this planet, so let’s make the most of them. Enjoy the good times and get through the bad ones. People have been doing it for centuries and I can too.

The Lord gave Jesus the difficult task of being the Truth to power. “**for Jesus’ name had become known... But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”**” Moses, Nathan, Elijah, and John the Baptist—Jesus stood in a long line of prophets who spoke of the way of God, but Jesus is more than a prophet, He is God. To be certain He did speak the truth to the powers that be: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Scribes. He wasn’t a weakling: He cast out demons, He healed the sick, He comforted the downtrodden. He didn’t shy away from calling out those who would spiritually abuse others. He didn’t compromise the beliefs and teachings of the Word. He spoke up for the weak: associating with tax collectors and sinners.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus cries these familiar words from the cross. It would appear that Jesus shared the fate of John the Baptist: killed for speaking the truth, killed for upsetting the powers that be, killed for threatening Satan’s so-called status as ruler of this world. We see the forces of evil laughing in joy as Jesus breathes His last.

“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” The devil and his demonic horde will stop at nothing to exterminate God’s Church on Earth. When they saw Jesus Christ, the faithful Church reduced to one man, the demons couldn’t help themselves. Satan struck at Christ, and sentenced Him to death, but in so doing, Satan took the bait. In swallowing the Author of Life, Satan thought that Death had won.

Not the case. Death could not hold the sinless Author of Life down, and on the third day, Jesus overcame sin, death, and the Devil, defeating them once and for all. Jesus rose again on Easter. And it is through this new life that Jesus has redeemed the suffering, sin, and sorrow of His Church. In Christ, John the Baptist is raised, and the martyrs are given new life. In Christ, we can find meaning to our suffering as we face persecution, hardships, and calamities. In Christ, we can be bold in our witness, and not be afraid of the physical suffering of Israel by Pharaoh, the emotional pressure of speaking out against abuses, and the temptation to compromise our beliefs for fear of rejection. In Christ, we know that even if we are killed for our faith, we have the promise of eternal life waiting for us.

In Christ, we can be the Church: forgiven, redeemed, and renewed. Bold to share our faith in the face of a hostile culture. Abundant in loving those around us no matter their background. And unafraid of rejection or pain. Because in Christ our weakness is made strong, we can gladly follow in the footsteps of Moses, Nathan, Elijah, John the Baptist, and even Christ Himself. Amen!