

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

John was in prison, put there by that fox Herod Antipas. John the Baptist was in prison, not a very pleasant place. John the Baptist was in prison and surely knew the death sentence that awaited him, though perhaps not the grisly way it was done. John the Baptist was in prison for the capital crime of telling the tetrarch Herod that he had sinned in taking his brothers' wife Herodias as his own. John the Baptist was in prison, and the thrilling voice of this prophet that had been sounding, proclaiming, "Christ is near," had been silenced.

More than that, John's own faith was wavering; under the pressure of an unjust imprisonment, a tyrannical ruler, foul quarters, an uncertain future, doubts were creeping into John's head.

To be sure, Luther once preached, that John was merely pointing his disciples to Christ saying: you "go and learn who is the true doctor and preacher. [This is not for my benefit.] I know it well that he is the true Christ . . . , but . . . you go to him and hear for yourselves from him personally, so that you will divorce yourselves from me . . . in order to cling to this man on whom your and the entire world's salvation depends" (Luther Advent sermon). Do you get it? Luther suggests that John didn't send the disciples to Jesus to bring an answer back to him, that he might be strengthened in his faith. John's faith was just fine. John sent his disciples for their sake.

Now, I'm sorry. I know Luther said it, but I don't buy it. With these closing words, Jesus sent John's disciples back to him: "*Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.*" That is, blessed is "*the one*" whose faith in the face of worries and betrayals, persecutions and hatred, even death, "*endures to the end*" (Matt. 10:22). These words bear witness to the fact that temptations are real and they are dangerous to our eternal salvation. Only the one who endures in faith "*will be saved.*"

To be sure, we like our saints to be superheroes. We revel in the stories of saints of old who looked death in the face and never wavered. We like the story of Polycarp who at the threat of death was asked to deny Christ and say to the Christians, "Away with the Atheists," but who instead looked at the crowd of heathens in the stadium and "waving his hand towards them, . . . said, 'Away with the Atheists.'" The proconsul wasn't done: "reproach Christ," he said to Polycarp, but Polycarp responded, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?" (Martyrdom of Polycarp, ch. 9). Polycarp was to be burned in fire, but when the fire was kindled and Polycarp set in the midst of it, he wasn't burned but only browned like the crust of bread, the story goes. It took an executioner with a dagger to pierce Polycarp through and kill him, and the blood that flowed out of him was so great that it extinguished the fire — so the story goes (Martyrdom, ch. 15 & 16).

Or consider St. Lawrence, a deacon in 3rd century Rome. Again, as the story goes, Lawrence was responsible for the Church treasury and the distribution of alms to the poor. When the Prefect of Rome demanded the treasures, Lawrence brought instead the poor, and said, “Behold, these are the church’s treasures.” For that, Lawrence was condemned to death over a bed of hot coals. Supposedly after some time, so the story goes, he cheerfully declared: “Turn me over! I’m done on this side.” (Catholic Encyclopedia and Wikipedia, St. Lawrence).

There is surely much of these stories that is true. These Christians were surely martyred. They may have done it with a show of resolve. But with no inner struggle or doubts? It’s not realistic, in my view. Indeed, when we turn Lawrence, and Polycarp, and John the Baptist, into men without struggle and doubts and fear, we turn these real people into myth and legend, and they lose their influence on us. They become like superheroes to us doing feats of faith that we can never attain.

But John the Baptist was a real man, with real weaknesses and real struggles. That doesn’t mean that he was a reed bending in whatever direction the wind blew. He was “*a prophet ... and more than a prophet.*” He was the long foretold “*messenger*” sent to “*prepare [the Lord’s] way before*” Him. He was great — “*among those born of women none ... greater.*” And yet, a man, tempted by the devil, the world, and his own sinful nature; a man who like the rest of us needed to pray, “*lead us not into temptation,*” knowing that “*God tempts no one. [But] we pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that [these enemies] may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice*” (Small Catechism, LP, 6th Petition).

In fact, I submit, knowing that John the Baptist was sorely tested in his faith, with doubts and fears, helps me in mine. If John the Baptist could be so tested with all that he knew and experienced, then my fiery trials (1 Pet. 4:12) should not be unexpected. For John surely believed. He knew Jesus even while in the womb of his mother where he leaped for joy; he surely knew Jesus growing up (they were cousins and only 6 months apart); Jesus may very well have been a disciple of John at first, and John later baptized Jesus, knowing that he should be the one being baptized by Jesus; John is the one who “*saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove*” and remain on Jesus (John 1:32), that John might know that Jesus was “*the Son of God*” (John 1:34). John got it; he knew and believed and proclaimed Jesus: “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29)!

Therefore, this knowledge helps us when our faith is tested by our enemies — you know these—the same as for John: the devil, the world, and our sinful nature — it helps to know “*that the same kinds of suffering*” were experienced by John, and “*are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world,*” and that even as John

resisted these enemies, and “*your brotherhood*” are “[*resisting them*], *firm in [their] faith*” (1 Pet. 5:9), so can you, firm in your faith, as you abide in Jesus.

For that’s what Jesus did for John as John’s disciples came up to Jesus to ask for John, “*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*” “Are you really the one who is going to save us ‘*from our enemies*’ (Luke 1:71)?” Jesus didn’t answer right away. He performed a few miracles as a confirming testimony to the prophetic word that John had been preaching. He healed “*many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits.*” He restored sight to those who were blind. And then He told the disciples to return to John with the words of Isaiah and the psalms on their lips: Jesus is doing what is ascribed to the Lord. He “*executes justice for the oppressed,*” the lame, the lepers, the deaf. He “*gives food to the hungry, ... sets the prisoners free, ... opens the eyes of the blind.*” He raises the dead!

Jesus sent John’s disciples back to him with the Good News on their lips, to build John up in his faith as he endured the suffering that comes with being faithful. “Jesus is the Christ,” they surely told him. “He is that Lamb of God, John, even as you proclaimed. Forgiveness is found in Him, and life and salvation. Therefore, John, you can rejoice, even as you decrease in your suffering. The Lord is at hand. Christ is near. And He is increasing. He is accomplishing what the Lord sent Him to do: redeeming His people, saving them from their enemies, delivering them from bondage to sin and death.”

This is Good News not just for John, but for us, too. The only difference is that what Jesus was accomplishing then has now been accomplished for the world. For He came as the least, descending from the Father in great humility into our flesh, that He might become even less — “*despised and rejected [not only] by men,*” but also “*stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted,*” “*crushed*” as an “*offering for [our] guilt,*” His soul “*poured out*” unto death (Is. 53). Yet now highly exalted, “*greatest in the kingdom,*” having won the victory for us.

And the fruit of that victory, He offers up to us by the same word and by His Sacraments, to strengthen our faith in the midst of our struggles. By these God works to keep us firm in the faith until the end, so that, “when our last hour comes, [He will] give us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven” (Small Catechism, LP, 7th Petition). So take heart! Even rejoice, not only “*in hope of the glory of God ... but [also] in [your] sufferings*” (Rom. 5:2-3). “*Again I will say, rejoice,*” for we have God’s glorious promise: “*after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen*” (1 Pet. 5:10-11).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.