**Text: Amos 7:1-15, Mark 6:14-29**

Swimming Against the Stream

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The Bible is an interesting book. It has a message that is unique, a story unlike any other ever told. It is the message and the story of God’s relationship with His people. It contains stories of improbable victory, of charity, and self-sacrifice. Then it has stories like the one we read today. The Bible contains parables, riddles and poems which describe God’s work in our world in such a beautiful way it brings a tear to your eye. And then there are stories like the one from our Gospel lesson today. It is certainly an interesting story, for John the Baptist was a rather interesting man. The best way that I could describe him would be as an American Frontiersman. A rough and tumble kind of a guy like Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed, Davy Crockett, or Jim Bowie. The American frontiersman in fact I think is one of the forgotten aspects of American lore. If there is any area in which the ideals of the founding fathers were adhered to it was among those settlers that braved the wilderness, as well as the people that lived there, in order to establish what we now know as the United States. I recently visited Frankenmuth for the first time and I was amazed at the story of the people that founded St. Lorenz and the town there. It certainly required a level of fortitude that is certainly hard to find in today’s society. As a millennial I grew up with a wealth of experiences that most previous generations didn’t. Air conditioning for example, has never been anything I have lived without. This also meant that my mother had better access to follow her ambitions to be a businesswoman and for a time my brother and I spent a couple nights a week with grandma and grandpa. Often times we would be spoiled to death, it was terrible. We would have a good steak, or go out to eat somewhere, and of course there was ice cream. Then it was time for us to watch a movie. I don’t mean an animated movie or anything like that, no we watched the movies that told of the great American adventure. We watched the stars like John Wayne, Dean Martin, and Robert Mitchum in movies like True Grit, Rio Bravo, and El Dorado. My brother and I loved these stories of rugged cowboys fighting off outlaws or corrupt lawmen, or fighting with Indians or against them, they are awesome stories from a different era. After watching a movie we would then go to bed and my grandfather would read us a chapter of a book. One that I vividly remember was a book called *Kazan the Wolf Dog*. It was written in 1914 and again was the story of a dog living life in the wilderness in northern Canada. Nature and stories of perseverance were two of my grandfather’s favorite things and he did what he could to share those with us. One of my favorite John Wayne movies is The Alamo, a movie in which he plays one of the most legendary figures in American history, Davy Crockett.

You know the story of the Alamo has always fascinated me. It is a story that is both a part of our history, and a legend that is a great tale of the American spirit. There are many other stories like this in history, the story of the last stand. No matter who it is, we always seem to be on the side of who is making the stand, who has the odds stacked against them. In the case of the Alamo it was the 260 Texas fighters vs. 1800 Mexican regulars. The story of this battle is one that gave an entire state it’s nickname, Tennessee. For among the defenders of the Alamo were Davy Crockett, a man who was a state representative for Tennessee in the United States Congress, and his Tennessee Volunteers. The Alamo became the war cry for Sam Houston at the Battle of San Jacinto, which won Texas their independence from Mexico. The Alamo is something that has been romanticized and why not? Those men certainly knew what they were getting into. I’m certain that at some point the realization struck them that they were probably not going to make it. That’s why their stand is so admirable. They decided to go down swinging and there is just something to that philosophy of never giving up, that is just inspiring to us. The stories of the prophets and the apostles, are very similar to these men at the Alamo. They faced enormous odds, and oftentimes they met their untimely demise. The message that Jesus carried was one of peace, love, and forgiveness, and he was put to death. The apostles that followed, most met rather gruesome ends. So is it a surprise that John the Baptist loses his head for saying something that should come as common sense? John told Herod, “**It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.**” I know. That’s extremely controversial. Yet those words, would end up costing John his life. His stand for the traditional values of marriage and commitment of one man to one woman, cost him his life.

Can you imagine what would happen to John and his preaching today? In fact I think we have a pretty good idea what would happen. John would meet resistance, in the same way that all the other prophets would. There would be a public outcry to prevent John from preaching. He would’ve been called nasty names and taken out of the public eye. But the prophets were used to fighting a losing battle. You see throughout the history of Israel the prophets have always been swimming against the culture. When the people of Israel are no longer listening, well there’s the prophet telling them that maybe they should listen. Our old testament lesson comes from Amos, a prophet who calls out the king of Israel and says, “**the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.**” Now that is probably not a message that the people of Israel wanted to hear, especially the king. It certainly would’ve gone against the tide of the culture. But it wasn’t the job of Amos to tell the people what they wanted to hear. It was his job to tell them the word of God. In the same way, it wasn’t John the Baptist’s job to go into Herod’s room every night and make sure that it’s only his wife in the room. But it was John’s job to teach the word of God. This job has now been passed down to us. It is certainly a daunting task, but all we can do is represent the word of God faithfully and truly. What a surprise it is again, that the word of God comes in opposition of our culture. I’m sure that the message of John the Baptist would be most unpalatable for us, given how much sex pervades our culture. But this is 2018, certainly we wouldn’t kill him. No instead we would make him a pariah, someone not welcome within the bounds of our civilized culture. Do you think this mattered to John? Do you think this should matter to us? They took everything from John, yet he did not take back his testimony. If they come to take everything from you, because of your faith, will you stand firm? Martin Luther wrote, as part of his great hymn, A Mighty Fortress is our God, “And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, let these all be gone, they yet have nothing won; the kingdom ours remaineth.” Look at what he lists there. He doesn’t list a few things that we could go without, he talks about losing everything, goods, reputation, family, and home, all the things that are the focal points of our earthly lives.

Yet even though those all be gone, the kingdom ours remaineth. John had this sure and certain hope, that the kingdom belonged to the people of God. He didn’t recant, he didn’t walk back his words. He spoke the truth of God and was punished for it. The church is in a similar position right now. The true church is speaking the word of God faithfully, and wherever that word is preached there is opposition to it. Yet take they our organ, building, maybe even our preachers, and those gathered around the word of God will still remain. The church will endure the trials that are ahead. It has dealt with terrible atrocities before. Even though we are upstream from the culture, we have a true and certain hope that the kingdom is ours. The kingdom that was won for us by Christ Jesus and his death and resurrection. This is the certainty that shall leave us undaunted amidst the trials ahead. Amen. Now may the peace of God which surpasses our understanding keep and guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.