

“508 AND STILL COUNTING-MARTIN LUTHER AND THE REFORMATION”

Message for Reformation Sunday

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JEREMIAH 31:31-34 ** ROMANS 3:19-28 ** JOHN 8:31-36

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

Happy Reformation Sunday!

Years ago, I took a class in Chillicothe at the Lay School of Theology in sermon preparation led by Professor Hank Langknecht from Trinity. One of the things he mentioned right off was the suggestion that you shouldn't preach a sermon using all four of the lessons for the day. I've tried to live by that in my career at Bethel but I have deviated from it on a couple of occasions. Today I'm going to do that again, deviate from the norm and use all four of our lessons. They are always the same for this special day of the church calendar, Reformation Sunday: Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Psalm 46; Romans 3: 19-28, and John 8: 31-36. And before you all go into a panic trying to figure just how long this message will be, let me reassure you I won't go over an hour!

Our story begins as the baby's first cries echoed from wall to wall, warming the whole house on that cold November 10th, 1483. Hans Luther, copper miner in little Eisleben, Germany, smiled nervously at his wife, Margaret. Her tired eyes returned his smile, even as they mirrored her prayer of thanks for having safely given birth to a second child, a son, no less.

On the very next day, Hans carefully bundled his newborn boy in the warmest blankets he could find. He quickly walked the two windy blocks to St Peter's Church. Here, on November 11, the proud father handed his son to the priest. "Martin Luther," chanted the priest as he three times poured water on the child's wrinkled forehead. "I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Once the Baptism was over, Hans headed for home, snugly cradling little Martin in his brawny arms. Walking to his wife's bedside, he gently

handed her the whimpering baby. “Here Margaret, take our Martin and care for him. And pray that no evil will come to him. For who knows what plans God has for him?”

Have you ever wondered what would have happened if Martin Luther had not been born, or if he had died in his cradle? Would we still have a Reformation, led by someone else, maybe one of his friends, or would this day be like any other day, just another Sunday? They might be interesting thoughts to entertain but God had a plan and God’s plans always come through, especially when they involve the heart, our heart!

Many of our metaphors involve the heart. For instance, you can learn something by heart. When you learn something by heart, it means that you’ve repeated it so often that you absolutely know it. It’s deeply embedded in you, like the words to the Pledge of Allegiance. You just know it.

Some of the things we know by heart are very, very significant to us, like the Lord’s Prayer. We know the Lord’s Prayer by heart. But there are also some really silly things we know by heart. For instance, if you were born before 1970, and I know that at least a couple of you were, then you know that “two all beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions on a sesame seed bun” are the makings of a Big Mac. I know that by heart but it doesn’t edify my life in any way!

So we may know something by heart, but that doesn’t guarantee it’s something worth knowing. However, if we say that we take something to heart, now, this is much more significant. When we take something to heart, we’ve embraced it deeply. It touches us, not just intellectually, but emotionally, too. We feel it through and through.

In our reading from the prophet Jeremiah, he writes about the new covenant God will establish with God’s people:

“This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

This covenant would be written on their hearts and on our hearts!

Jeremiah looks to a day when Israel will take to heart God's covenant love for them. They'll never have to teach one another, they'll never have to say, "Know the Lord." They just will because it's written on their heart.

God's covenant of steadfast love is not grounded in the fickle winds of worldly whims. It's based on the one thing of lasting value and unshakable truth. And that is the character – not of ourselves – but of God. God's character. And God's character is love. This is the truth that will never lead us astray.

And this divine love has chosen US. Not because we've measured up to a standard of divine acceptability, but because that is what flows from the heart of God! Love comes from God. This is what Jesus was trying to explain to the crowd who was following him. They were starting to take heed of his message. He said, "Hey, if you keep this up, if you keep centering your heart on my message, then you will be free."

Free from that devilish, worldly covenant based on judgment and measuring up. Free from judging yourself, judging others. Free of judgment because God's love will be written on your heart! The truth of your identity lies in this unceasing love of God for you! And to the degree that you dwell in that truth, you are truly free.

God first wrote on your heart at your baptism. God said, "You are mine, and I love you! And nothing can ever change that." And for the rest of our lives meditate on that simple truth. It's so very basic and uncomplicated that it evades us. And that's why we continue in the word, so that we can remember who we truly are – we are beloved children of God. Every day, God etches that a little more clearly in our hearts. And the more you take that to heart, you dwell in the freedom and peace and joy in the one who is our home.

God says in Jeremiah: 'and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.'

God's forgiveness and mercy are just like that. God didn't take the easy way out. He didn't kick around the closets of heaven in search of some old tarnished trinket to hand to us. He gave the very best. He offered a gift that had never been handled, never been seen, never been experienced before, namely, he gave himself.

So, whenever you feel disappointed, disheartened, worn out, or abused, the Lord will come to you and say, "Surprise! I've carried all of that pain for you." Whenever you feel despised or alone, your Savior will come and say, "Surprise!

I've been hated and disowned for you!" Whenever you feel filthy dirty, as if you are the worst sinner on earth, you will feel the tender love of Christ as he embraces you. But don't be surprised when he does.

We opened this morning's service with 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God!' You knew it was the Lutheran fight song, didn't you? Schools have their own fight songs; why can't churches? I love that hymn and I know you do too. There's a line in it that says "God's judgment must prevail." I always emphasize that word 'must.' God's judgment must prevail; in the end, folks, it will prevail!!

That hymn which is one of the most popular Reformation hymns was based on the words of Psalm 46. Martin Luther combined the thoughts of this psalm with a popular beer drinking song and wrote the powerful hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." The hymn and Psalm have been tools of comfort and strength for countless people of faith as they have faced the challenges and tragedies of life.

In times of trouble, God is indeed our refuge and fortress. A fortress is a defensive structure that allows its occupants to withstand the attacks of enemies. A refuge is a place where one flees for protection and healing. God moves this way in our lives as we face the trials and tribulations of life.

God is a mighty fortress. The walls of this fortress are impenetrable. Life, Satan, even our enemies cannot overcome us, if we remain safe in God's presence. God's presence as our refuge and fortress is effective.

Some people brag that they have no fear; 'I'm not afraid of anything.' They kid themselves. They might not be afraid of snakes or spiders, heights or speed, but each of us has our fears.

The psalmist rejoices that we have no reason to fear when God is present in our lives.

The degree of turmoil that the psalmist and Luther write about surprises us. We think that God's strength will get us through traffic jams, bad meetings at work, and school troubles with the kids. The psalmist writes about worldwide changes, earthquakes, and tempestuous seas. Martin Luther writes about the loss of home, goods, honor, child or spouse and loss of life—still God will prevail and we have no reason to fear.

God's love and presence in our lives is the one thing that no one and nothing can take away from us. We might lose everything else, but we still have Jesus.

One of the hardest things for a Christian is to learn to be still and wait for God. It takes trust and faith that God is true to his promises and that God really will not forsake us. As our fortress and refuge, though, God invites us to have no fear and to be still.

God doesn't guarantee successes and a stress free life. God does promise that his love and presence will always be a part of our lives. As such, we can face life with courage and a certain fearlessness, because God is a mighty fortress.

Be still and know that I am God. Have you forgotten the atheist tells us they do not believe in the existence of God?

I read about an atheist who was hiking in the woods when he stumbled across a huge hungry grizzly bear. The bear reared up to its full height eight feet tall and gave a roar as it leaned in toward the man. The atheist screamed in terror "Oh God, help me!!!" God said to him, "So all your life, you denied My existence, but now you call for My aid since death is upon you? I am sorry, my son, but it is too late; I cannot save you." The atheist thought quickly. "Well, God, if it is too late for me to become a Christian, how about you just convert the bear?" Time began moving again, and the bear immediately stopped its roaring, knelt quietly and respectfully, and began speaking. "O Lord, bless this meal in which I am about to partake!"

"Come now, regard the works of the Lord, what desolations God has brought upon the earth." Did you notice there are none, not one, of our faults and failings listed next? No, we hear God's promise to make wars cease, to break the bow and shatter the spear, to create an atmosphere in which people can 'Be still and know that I am God!'

We are not very inclined to think of Martin Luther as a hymn-writer, and yet, the great Reformer also had the gift of music and wrote some 37 hymns including "Away in a Manger." By 1523—a mere six years after the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses—Luther was committed to providing German-language hymns for the people to sing and was actively seeking gifted poets to work with him on this project. Luther would often say to his friends: "let us defy the devil and sing a hymn."

Luther, like everyone in his generation, knew that he was a sinner. He tried, desperately not to be one, but he was. He fasted until he fainted; he confessed his transgressions until his priest got bored with the endless and repetitious list of wrongdoings. Luther knew he was a sinner, even as he knew a perfect God was committed to punishing men like himself. Fear of Divine anger became Luther's motivating force to try to please God with perfect behavior.

Today, people in our culture still want the answer to this question: Does God love me? How can I be sure I have peace with God? These eternal questions that plagued Martin Luther still remain.

In the classic Latin phrase of the Reformation, *sola gratia*, "Grace alone," there are actually four and some suggest a fifth one: *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola scriptura*, *sola Christus*, and *solī Deo Gloria*, to the glory of God alone. Folks, we are not saved by our intentions, good wishes, exemplary deeds, or right thinking. We are saved only by God's grace. Unfortunately we Americans have been raised to depend on ourselves. We value our personal freedom to choose our own destiny. We don't like to think that we can't save ourselves, that we need to rely on God's grace alone for salvation.

In the book of Romans, the third chapter, Luther read that while all have sinned and fallen far short of God's expectations, we are declared forgiven and free of our broken commandments if our repentant hearts are connected by faith to God's Son. Luther learned what had been forgotten for centuries and blurred by the "Church": that while God is a God of justice, He is also a God of grace. Thus, sinful human beings could be saved because God sent His Son to redeem us, to pay the price which would buy us back from sin, the devil, and death. How can I have peace with God? These were the questions for the ordinary man on the street in the 16th century. It remains the questions today. The answer: "Only believe that Jesus died on the cross for you." Accept the work already accomplished at the cross "therefore we have been justified through faith...and we now have peace with God through Jesus Christ." It's that simple. It's that easy. But there was nothing easy about the cross on which Jesus died. The cross was heavy, the blood was real and the price to set us free was extravagant. God paid the price to bring us back to himself so that we would know his love and acceptance.

After 500 years, does the Reformation still matter? Do we still need a day every year to remind us of the Reformation? After all, a recent poll showed that over half of American Protestants didn't even know that Martin Luther's writings and actions inspired the Reformation. And this was a multiple-choice question with

only three choices! So, most Christians today say, “No, the Reformation doesn’t matter.”

If Reformation Day only celebrated Lutheranism, then it shouldn’t matter. If Reformation Day only celebrated the pride we have in being Lutheran, then it shouldn’t matter. But if Reformation Day is about the truth that Martin Luther dusted off in all its shining glory, hidden by centuries of faulty doctrines, then the Reformation does matter.

Jesus said to the Jews and his disciples who believed in Him, “If you continue in my Word, you are truly my disciples. And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

That’s why there was a Reformation. That’s why we still have Reformation Day. That’s why the Reformation still matters. It matters because confessing the truth still matters!

I want to close with a quote from Martin Luther that expressed how he truly felt, and it’s a quote that applies to all of us here today: he said “When I look at myself, I don’t know how I can be saved; when I look at Jesus, I don’t know how I could be lost!”

Amen!!