

Today, on Reformation Sunday, we remember how Martin Luther rediscovered the Gospel, the Good News that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus God gives us freedom from sin and death and the gift of eternal life. October 31, 1517 is perhaps the most important day in Protestant history.

This was the day when Martin Luther posted on the doors of the church in Wittenberg his 95 Theses.

With this event, the Protestant Reformation was formally born when Luther laid the foundation for our evangelical faith which we celebrate today.

The Protestant Reformation movement was built primarily on three principles:

- the re-establishment of God's Word,
- the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Christ, and
- the restoration of congregational participation, especially congregational singing.

By the late Middle Ages the worshipping congregation did no or very little singing.

Most singing was done by choirs composed of monks or clerics.

The reformation made a big change in the church's singing and congregational participation.

Up to this time, the whole service was also conducted in Latin which most parishioners didn't understand and was now changed into the vernacular, the common language of the people.

Luther was born in 1483, nine years before Christopher Columbus discovered North America.

The people of his day were just like us in some ways, but very different in others.

One difference was in how they understood God.

It was common for the people of Luther's day to see God as an angry judge.

They even saw Jesus as one who demanded so much from people that they could never be on good terms with him.

Their prime concern was trying to escape an angry and vengeful God. Martin's father urged his son to go to university to study law and he became a happy and successful student.

But it all changed in July 1505.

As he was returning to school from a visit with his parents, a thunderstorm came up and a bolt of lightning knocked Luther to the ground.

He feared for his life and promised if God would save him, he'd enter a monastery and become a monk.

This incident tells something important about Luther's ideas of God. Like others of his day, Luther believed that God was angry and vengeful and when lightning struck, he thought it came from an All-Terrible God who was just waiting for his chance to get even with sinners.

Luther escaped the lightning and, true to his promise, he entered the monastery.

Monks in the 16th century led hard lives.

They lived in little rooms and were allowed nothing of their own.

They had only one piece of clothing, a robe of rough material, and the food was meager.

This kind of life had a purpose; they believed that if they denied themselves everything except the barest necessities, God would be pleased.

Like other monks, Luther would sometimes go for days without eating in order to please an angry God.

Monks also spent much time in prayer, but Luther prayed much longer than was required.

Sometimes at night, he would throw off his blankets and nearly freeze to death in order to punish himself for his sins.

For Luther, God was not a friend, but an enemy, and the main thing in life was to try to win favor with God.

Once he wrote: "I was myself more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created.

Love God? I hated him!"

His whole life had been consumed with pleasing an angry God.

He tried many ways to get God off his back, but sometimes he would throw up his hands and cry in desperation, “God, I don’t understand you!”

He had begun to realize that he didn’t understand how all of his agony could make God happy.

But there was another important discovery he made before things began to fall into place.

As a professor at Wittenberg University he taught a course in Paul’s Letter to the Romans in which the apostle used the word “justice.”

He wrote: “I had conceived a burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his Letter to the Romans, ‘the justice of God.’ I hated the God who punishes sinners. I had been taught to understand that justice is the way by which he punishes sinners and the unjust.”

Luther struggled to understand what Paul meant by this word, “justice.” But from this struggle emerged one of the great discoveries of all time which subsequently affected the whole of Christendom in its development throughout the world.

He realized that Paul was not merely talking of a just God, but also of a God who justifies his people, a God who sets them free from the consequences of sin.

In other words, God supplies the grace we need to stand free and totally blameless before God.

A whole new universe opened up to him one day when he was reading Romans, chapter three, the Second Lesson for Today:

“This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (22-24).

Luther wrote, “Thereupon I felt myself to be born again and to have gone through open doors into paradise.

The whole of Scripture took on new meaning.”

This rediscovery of the gospel formed the foundation of all that Luther was to teach, preach and write.

When Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1450, Luther’s writings became easily available throughout Europe.

This started a virtual revolution among other theologians like Calvin and Zwingli in Geneva, Switzerland and John Knox in Edinburgh, Scotland, who as Luther now saw in God a being who loved his people rather than hated them.

It's through our faith and not in the things we do that God's gift of salvation comes to us.

It's all grace, nothing but grace.

But over the years Luther became more and more upset at some practices of the church, especially the misuse of indulgences.

An indulgence was a paper promising that a person's time in purgatory would be reduced.

It's probably impossible for us today to even imagine how most people in Luther's day lived in almost constant fear of either going to hell or suffering in purgatory.

Purgatory was a very scary place, almost like hell, except the suffering wouldn't last forever.

The word "purgatory" comes from the Latin word "purgare, which means "to purge" or "purify."

The church saw purgatory as an intermediate and transitional state after physical death for purging or purifying a soul,

Purgatory was a place where we get cleaned up for heaven.

In the beginning, buying indulgences was taken very seriously.

Only people who truly repented of their sins could buy them.

The church used the money from the sales to support many kinds of church activities and works of charity.

But things changed.

Misuse of indulgencies became very common.

One of the worst misuses took place in 1517 when a monk by the name of John Tetzel was given the order to sell indulgencies in Germany to raise money.

He preached that repentance was no longer necessary and that anyone who had the money could buy indulgencies not only for themselves but also for family and friends so that they could escape the flames of purgatory.

His slogan was:

“Sobald das Geld im Kasten klinkt, die Seele in den Himmel springt.“

“As soon as the money in the coffer rings, the soul to heaven springs.”

The money was divided into two parts.

Half of the money was given to the archbishop of Mainz who had just paid a huge sum of money to the church to get his powerful position.

The rest of the money was used to help build the beautiful but very expensive Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome.

The church employed some of the world’s greatest and best architects, artisans and artists such as Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci and

Michelangelo.

It was the sale of indulgencies which caused Luther to write the 95 Theses.

He wrote that in matters of faith the Bible was the only authority and selling indulgencies was contrary to Scripture;

it threatened the salvation of believers, because those who paid for indulgencies were given the false idea that forgiveness of sins and eternal life could be bought with money.

We have to realize that in those days there was only one church and this church was a most powerful institution and there was no room for questioning its authority.

Church and state had absolute power over the lives and souls of their subjects.

Since the church alone decided the right way to understand God and the Bible, they did not agree with what Luther began to teach, preach and write.

Consequently, Luther had to be silenced one way or another.

Church leaders told him to recant, that is to withdraw and renounce his teaching, but he refused even when he was condemned and excommunicated from the church.

When his life was threatened, he found refuge at the fortress in Coburg under the protection of the reform-minded Duke of Saxony.

Finally, Luther and the church were at such odds with each other that the only solution seemed to be for himself and his followers to set out on their own.

This break with the church is known as the Protestant Reformation. Today we treasure the truth which Luther rediscovered that we are justified through faith in Christ and that we don't have to do things to make God love us "for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

The Hymn of the Day "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" is thought to be associated with the Fortress in Coburg where Luther found "refuge and strength" to work on his new doctrine and translation of the Bible from Hebrew, Greek and Latin into the common language of the people. This hymn reflects part of Luther's theology and soon became the rallying cry of the Reformation.

It's one of the greatest hymns of the church translated into over 200 languages.

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" is a paraphrase of Psalm 46, the Psalm for Today:

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea."

This psalm is a triumphant confession of fearless trust in God's love that still stands when all else has fallen, even if "the mountains fall into the heart of the sea."

This was the very passage of Scripture that comforted and gave "strength" to Martin Luther as the Protestant Reformation began in the 16th century and this is the confidence and "strength" we really need today.

When we experience the reality that "God is our refuge and strength," it drives our fear away and creates a quiet confidence that our loving God is in control of all things and rules over all that exists and that his promises are the same for us today to be "ever-present" and available to help US in OUR time of "trouble." Amen.

P.S. We use the color red on Reformation Sunday to signify the work of the Holy Spirit who blew across the church of the 16th century to bring about renewal within the church.

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