

“The Reformation is All About Jesus”

Romans 3:19-28

All year we have been focusing our attention on the 500th Anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation of the Church. We are having a special service at St. James. PBS aired a new movie focusing on the life and work of Martin Luther. As we continue in this year of celebration, it is important for us to remember that the Reformation begun 500 years ago is not all about Luther. It is all about Jesus and what He has done for God’s sinful, dying children on Earth. We, who have fallen short of the glory of God.

“A mighty fortress is our God. A trusty shield and weapon.” Martin Luther wrote those words in the year 1529; one year before the presentation of the Augsburg Confession. When he wrote that most famous hymn, Luther had been labeled a criminal and had lived under the threat of imprisonment or death for 8 full years. But the Reformation is not about Luther. It is about Jesus. He is our Mighty Fortress.

Luther’s life consisted of a series of events and choices where the Lord called upon him to risk everything and endure anything for the sake of the Gospel and the sake of the elect in Christ.

Martin Luther grew up planning to be a lawyer. Or rather I should say, Luther grew up with his father Hans planning on Martin being a lawyer. But heeding the call of the Lord to enter into church work, Luther risked

everything, gave up all he had, and entered into a monastery.

Luther's motivation for entering the monastery was questionable. He was still a long way from understanding the words of St. Paul that we are "justified by faith apart from observing the law [Rom. 3:28]. Regardless of his motivation, needless to say, his father Hans was not pleased. His Father in heaven had other plans.

After becoming a priest and a doctor of theology at the University of Wittenburg, Luther put himself at great risk by questioning the pope's sale of indulgences – those worthless pieces of paper through which one could supposedly purchase justification, could purchase the forgiveness of sin which only comes through Jesus. With the posting of the 95 Theses, Martin Luther became the target of not only the Pope but the Archbishop of Mainz who was splitting the indulgence sale with the Pope. And the Archbishop of Mainz was one of the eight Electors who elected the Emperor at that time – not a person you want as an enemy.

But not only did Luther risk everything by squashing the pope's and the archbishop's indulgence sale, but he questioned even the sale of indulgences authorized by his own prince, Frederick the Wise, his most influential supporter and his employer I might add.

Like St. Paul, Luther had no respect for persons or their place. The truth of God's Word applies to everyone. No one received preferential treatment. And for this, Luther gained the respect of both prince and pauper.

This became extremely important when, in 1521, Luther stood before the Imperial Diet where the princes of Germany and the Emperor himself would sit in judgment over Luther. However, Luther was not given the chance to defend his faith. All his writings were placed before him and he was asked two questions: “One, are these your books? And two, are you going to stand by them, or are you going to retract [or recant] them and thereby admit that you were in error?”

After realizing that he was not going to be able to debate the points in question and present Scripture in support of his writings, he asked for a day to think about his answer. The next day he returned before the Emperor and the leaders of the Holy Roman Empire and he answered them with these words, which he probably assumed would be his last public statement.

He said: “Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not [recant] anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.

“I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.”¹

Following this meeting, Luther was branded a heretic and a criminal

¹LW 32:112-113.

who could legally be hunted down, captured, or killed by anyone. Only through the protection of Frederick the Wise, and, more importantly, God's guiding hand, was Luther able to survive. Frederick the Wise, who's indulgence sales Luther also criticized, hid Luther in Wartburg Castle for about two years, and protected him after he returned to Wittenburg.

But the Reformation is not about Luther. It is about Christ and His Church proclaiming justification and life for dying sinners worthy of eternal judgment, because we have fallen short of the glory of God.

Pray that the Lord never asks you to put yourself at risk in the way Luther was asked [But be ready if He does]. God is a mighty fortress that protects and preserves his people from all enemies. But the focus of God's protection is not for our mortal bodies. He is much more concerned with our life of faith. God's mighty fortress was built with two pieces of wood and four nails.

The cross is the fortress in which Luther trusted. He knew that his mortal flesh meant nothing; but his faith and God's Word meant everything. Really when you look at Luther's life in the proper context, Luther risked nothing (just his body, just his mortal flesh, which he knew would be gone some day anyway). He risked nothing to gain everything.

And with his focus on Christ and not himself, he wrote those words, and we can sing those words: "And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife, Let these all be gone, They yet have nothing won; The Kingdom ours remaineth." It is all about Jesus and what He has done. Amen.