

"THE WAY OUT OF TURMOIL"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto
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Romans 3:21 - 28

Martin Luther - a man of turmoil, the hero of the Reformation, the man who led the protest movement against the errors, inadequacies, and greed of the church at that time, the man whose desire to reform the church led to the division of the church into Protestant and Catholic, the man who was of particular inspiration to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, and to Johann Sebastian Bach, whose music we hear today - Martin Luther was born in Germany, 500 years ago this year, November 10, 1483.

Today is Reformation Sunday as the Reformation was essentially born on Halloween in 1517. Halloween means "hallowed evening," the evening before All Saints Day. Because the populace thought of saints as spirits, the hallowed-evening degenerated into what we call Halloween. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg - 95 propositions for debate, on the question of forgiveness, over which he differed with the Pope and the practices of the church at that time.

Martin Luther's 500th birthday is especially being celebrated in Germany this year, in both West and East Germany. The museums have dug out Reformation-era manuscripts, paintings, and sculptures. Church and secular institutions are offering a wide range of seminars. 53 publishing houses in West Germany and 30 in East Germany have new books out on Luther, over 120 books published so far. The research has been very personal as well. They discovered that the latest direct descendant of Luther at the age of 8 - weeks was baptized this spring. And Luther's favorite supper consisted of grilled herring, cold peas and mustard!

Martin Luther was controversial - highly intelligent, agitated, flamboyant, even vulgar in his attacks on the Pope. He was a man of his times, his culture (as we all are) and wrote some words we wish he hadn't. He was opposed to peasants revolting against oppressive landowners, and even exhorted the landowners to "smite, stab and kill" the rabble. Adolph Hitler called Martin Luther the greatest man in German history, and used Luther's attacks on Jews as part of the Hitler propaganda.

Luther had his weaknesses, and errors, as we all do and as all heroes do, but Luther is our hero, a giant in our history. He grasped the truth of the gospel, experienced the gospel vividly in his own life, wrote it articulately, preached it emphatically, and debated for it courageously. Luther was a man of turmoil who found his way out of the turmoil.

He was born of peasant parents. His father was a miner. The entire training of home and church was designed to instill the fear of God and reverence for the church. God was seen as wrathful and stern, who demanded and judged.

Luther's first crisis came at the age of 21. He was a student at the University and was returning to school after a visit with his parents when, suddenly, lightning struck, and a bolt struck him to the earth. In that single flash, Luther saw his life. There was God the almighty, Christ the Judge, and surrounding Luther were demons - fiends laughing at him, trying to seize his curly hair and throw him into the fiery hell. No wonder, is it, that Luther cried out to his father's saint, the saint of the miners, "St. Anne, help me! I will become a monk!" He entered an Augustinian monastery, eventually became a priest and tried desperately to find peace. He knew he had to find harmony and peace with God, who both attracted Luther and repelled him.

For the next several years, Luther sought a way out of the turmoil. He tried faithfully all the methods the church had to offer: sacrament, pilgrimages, indulgences, and the intercession of the saints. In the monastery, he fasted, confessed his sins meticulously, slept without a blanket to subjugate the flesh, and all to no avail. He could not satisfy God.

Indulgence was the belief in transferred credit. If you could not reach peace with God and go to Heaven on your own merits, you could (usually for a small or large fee) receive an indulgence, and transfer unused credit from a saint to yourself. This money-making venture of the church was vehemently opposed by Luther in later years. But, for now, he tried it, to no avail.

It was believed that if one went on a pilgrimage to Rome, viewed artifacts of the saints, relics they were called, and climbed Pilate's stairs, salvation for self or for dead loved ones would be granted. Luther climbed the stairs on hands and knees, recited a prayer on each step and kissed each step. When he reached the top, he cried, full of doubt, "Who knows whether it is so?" He reported that he went to Rome with onions and returned to Germany with garlic.

Luther was then transferred to Wittenberg. Wittenberg had a university and an Augustinian monastery, whose vicar was Johann von Staupitz. He became Luther's spiritual guide and none better could be found. Staupitz was a mystic and urged Luther not to try so hard, but to surrender himself to the love of God. "Love God," he encouraged Luther. "Love God!" snorted Luther. "How can you love a consuming fire? How can you love an angry, judging and damning God? Love God? I hate him!" The word of blasphemy had been spoken, and Luther was devastated. Where was help? Where was peace? How could he find salvation, reconciliation with God? How could he find a way out of turmoil?

Luther's struggle is the struggle of everyone. His turmoil seems different to us moderns, perhaps even strange. These are different times, with different concepts, a different world-view. Few of us today are frightened by the prospect of a fiery, torturous hell. Nor do we see demons and devils on every hand trying to push us into hell. Nor do we view God as terrible, wrathful, and angry.

But we do live in turmoil. We view our turmoil as being caused by self-doubt, a poor self-image, overload of pressure. "Can I handle my life?" "Where do I find security?" "Am I in over my head, am I adequate?" Luther may have lived in medieval times, but his spirit struggle reads like ours, when we are honest. Luther knew doubt, pain, panic, despair, depression, anxiety, desolation and des- peration, just as we.

But Luther had one advantage over us moderns. Luther knew it was God for whom he was seeking, struggling and striving. He knew the way out of his turmoil was reconciliation, peace with God, salvation. We moderns aren't sure what we are seeking. We're not sure what drives us, what causes the turmoil, much less what is the way out of the turmoil.

The Christian gospel, so dramatically experienced and recorded by Luther, analyzes the human condition and makes sense out of it. There is something missing in human experience. There is something missing in your life. There is a basic, deep contradiction, an emptiness, alienation from the Creator and from your best self. There is disharmony - disharmony between people and people, between people and nature, between people and God. The Bible calls this human situation: SIN. What is the way out of sin, the way out of turmoil?

Luther's spiritual guide, Johann Staupitz, suggested that Luther teach in the Wittenberg University and that he teach Bible. Luther was astounded but agreed to try, for in teaching others perhaps he would learn. He was intrigued to study the Bible for in all his struggling, he had not studied the Bible. The Bible was not one of the resources recommended by the medieval church. Luther

began studying and lecturing on the Psalms and the Letter to the Romans. And there, he discovered and experienced the way out of sin and turmoil, and the way to God.

The process begins and began with God, not with us. We so often have it backwards - that salvation is something I must do, that I must earn, that if I'm good enough, or do enough good works, work and do my duty for the church, I will be saved. That is backwards. Salvation is a gift. God does the forgiving. God does the reconciling. God paid the price - and the price was high, namely the life of his Son, Jesus Christ. On the cross, with the sacrifice of his life, the shedding of his blood, Christ did all there is to do. In humility and gratitude, then, accept the gift of salvation. There is no earning it. Salvation is received by faith, a gift by the unmerited, underserved grace or love of God. A gift to be appropriated in gratitude and thanksgiving! A gift to be lived in joy! Our scripture lesson this morning said it splendidly, Romans 3:23-24, "*Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.*"

God has triumphed over the Devil and evil as we shall sing in Luther's great hymn, "*A Mighty Fortress is Our God.*" Through the resurrection, you and I have access to the power to die to sin and rise to a new life in Christ.

Then, out of the bounty, joy, love of forgiveness and reconciliation with God, then we serve because we want to, then we teach and share because we must for we are overflowing, then we give our 10%, our tithe of our income; to God's ministry because it is a privilege. It's a joy!

Luther found the way out of sin and turmoil and set the church on fire. So often we have extinguished the flame. Let it burn anew! God has provided the way out. Believe, accept it on faith, and you are saved.

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