

REFORMATION SUNDAY

October 25, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Jeremiah 31:31-34 Psalm 46 Romans 3:19-28 John 8:31-36

Several years ago, A&E, the cable channel, announced their list of the most influential people of the last one thousand years. Here are their top three:

- Johann Gutenberg, for his invention of the movable-type printing press, making books widely available and affordable for the first time.

- Isaac Newton, for his pioneering work in mathematics, physics and astronomy.

- And Martin Luther, for putting religion and education in the hands of the common people, and thereby laying the foundations for modern democracy.

But what if you were to go out on the street today and ask people, “Who was Martin Luther?” I’m afraid the most common answer you’d get would be, “Wasn’t he the guy who started the Civil Rights movement — the one who said, ‘I have a dream’?”

Well, if *anyone* has a responsibility to keep the memory of the original Martin Luther alive, it’s us — the particular tribe of Christians who’ve taken his name.

Martin Luther was born in Germany in 1483, nine years before Columbus landed in the New World. He was the son of Hans Luther, a former miner who had worked hard and prospered, eventually becoming the *owner* of a mine. Hans Luther wanted his son, Martin, to do even better than he had. So Hans decided that Martin would become a lawyer, and off to school he went.

Young Martin didn't have to struggle with his studies; he was a brilliant student. But he *did* struggle mightily with himself, with his own emotions. Through his late teens and early twenties, Luther was often depressed and anxious, plagued by nightmares and insomnia. If young Martin had lived in our day, his mood swings probably would have been leveled out by medication — and maybe the Reformation never would have happened!

But the emotional torments that Luther experienced were only partly medical — they were also theological. Luther lived in a world where death came early, and often suddenly. Death wasn't hidden away in hospitals or prettied up in funeral homes — death was a familiar companion in the sixteenth century. But it wasn't even death itself that struck fear into people like Martin Luther; it was the judgment that followed death.

For the people of Luther's day, Hell was as real a place as Death Valley — only hotter. And Luther, like most people, believed that Hell was where every person deserved to end up, because everyone was a sinner at heart. Since God was a just and righteous God, it was God's duty to send sinners to Hell, where they would experience inexpressible torment, for all eternity.

I don't think there's any question that Luther's picture of God as a harsh judge was a product, not just of the prevailing theology of his day, but also of his experiences with his own father. Hans Luther would often beat Martin when he misbehaved, as many parents did. And it seemed that nothing that Luther did could ever satisfy his father, or win his approval.

Young Martin transferred that picture of his own stern, judgmental father to God. He was convinced that nothing that he did could ever win God's love or acceptance, and that thought terrified and unnerved him.

In the summer of 1505, Luther was on his way back to college after a visit home; he was twenty-one. Suddenly a violent thunderstorm overtook him, and a bolt of lightning hurled him to the ground. That near-death experience convinced Luther that he had to do *something* to save his soul from eternal damnation. He determined to enter a monastery and become a monk.

But even the monastery couldn't quiet Luther's anxiety. He *tried* everything. Whatever the rules of his monastery required in terms of fasting or praying, Luther did more. He later wrote: "I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that . . . if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I would have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work."

But none of it helped. Even though Luther tried every means that the Church suggested to attempt to gain God's favor, he was still tormented by fear and by anger toward a God who could never be satisfied.

But a turning point came in 1513, when Luther's order sent him to the university at Wittenberg to study and to teach the Bible. It was Luther's first sustained encounter with scripture, and the moment of truth came while he was preparing his lectures on the Letters of St. Paul.

Luther was working on the first chapter of the Book of Romans, but he hit a wall when he got to verse 17. Romans 1:17 says: "For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed . . . ; as it is written, 'The righteous will live by faith.'"

Luther thought he understood the first part of that verse: “In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed . . .” He knew God was righteous and holy and punished human beings who weren’t. But what about the last part: “The righteous will live by faith”? How could *people* become righteous in the sight of God?

Luther had already tried every way he could think of to *be* righteous and holy, to *earn* God’s approval. But this verse seemed to be saying that God *gives* people righteousness — God *gives* people a right relationship with God. Luther couldn’t fathom it. Here’s how Luther himself later described what happened next:

Night and day I pondered, until I finally saw the *connection* between the righteousness of God and the statement that ‘the righteous live by faith.’ I grasped that the righteousness of God is that righteousness by which — through sheer grace and mercy — God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through an open door into paradise. The whole of scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘righteousness of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven . . .

Luther had discovered a God who *loved* him, and who only asked that Luther *trust* God in return. That trust, that *faith* in God, was the key; it was *faith* that set us right with God, not good works or clean living or acts of religious devotion — just faith, and faith alone.

In those days the Church taught people to fear God in the worst sense of that word, “fear.” And the Church *used* that fear to control the people, to get them to submit to Church teachings and obey Church authority. And they also used that fear to amass great wealth.

In 1517, shortly after Luther’s spiritual transformation, those Church leaders sent indulgence salesmen into Luther’s part of Germany. These salesmen taught that by buying a Letter of Indulgence, a piece of paper issued by the Church, people could have all their sins forgiven. They could even buy indulgences for loved ones who had already died, releasing them from Hell or Purgatory and sending them straight to heaven.

But now Martin Luther knew better. He had discovered right in the pages of scripture that Christians didn’t need to *buy* forgiveness — what freed a person from Hell was *faith*, not a piece of paper.

This indulgence business, Luther thought, was a terrible misunderstanding. Surely, if he could only tell them what he'd discovered, the bishops and the cardinals would see the error of their ways. And so, on October 31, 1517, Luther posted a list of 95 Theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg — 95 reasons why the sale of indulgences was wrong and ought to be stopped.

Well, you probably know what happened next. Instead of thanking Luther for his advice, the Church hierarchy tried to silence the troublesome little monk. And the more the Church tried to stifle Luther, the more he pushed back. The Pope branded Luther as a heretic and an outlaw, and tried everything he possibly could to suppress his teaching.

But, thanks to the support of the people and of some powerful German noblemen, Luther continued to speak and write, and his ideas sparked the movement that came to be known as the Protestant Reformation.

As for Luther himself, he continued to be at the center of the Reformation for the rest of his life. In 1546, after years of ill health, Martin Luther died at the age of 63. But his message and his movement live on. Martin Luther was the right man for the right time, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and armed with the truth of the Gospel and the Word of God — and there is no greater power in the world than that.

It's good to know about Martin Luther and the history of the Reformation. But more than just knowing about Luther, I would much rather that you leave church this morning knowing what *he* knew about *God*. I hope that you know, as he did, with total assurance and certainty:

- that God loves you;
- that by the grace of God through Jesus Christ, you are forgiven and made right with God; and,
- that all God asks of you is that you accept your salvation with trust, faith and thankfulness.

As Martin Luther read the Scriptures, he discovered the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. When he did, he said “the gate of heaven” swung open for him.

As Luther's spiritual descendants, may you have that same assurance of God's love and grace, and may the gate of heaven swing open for you!

Thanks be to God! Amen.

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This sermon is taken almost verbatim from a sermon preached by the Rev. Mark D. Ridley, “Meet Martin Luther” at Christ the King Lutheran Church – Vestal, New York, on October 30, 2005.