

Lessons of the Reformation
Romans 3: 21-24
Center Harbor Congregational Church – October 29, 2023
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The paraments are red this week because this is Reformation Sunday. Six years ago, on the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, I wrote a little play about it. Dave dressed in his academic regalia as Martin Luther, and he told Luther's story in dialog. Since it's been six years, I thought we could all benefit by hearing that story again, though I promised Dave he wouldn't have to dress up this time.

Martin Luther was born in 1483, the oldest son of a miner, and his father wanted him to rise in the world, so he scrimped and saved to send him off to university and then to law school, with hopes that he would return to his hometown one day and become the mayor. But Luther REALLY hated law school, and he wanted to drop out. Before long, he went home for a visit. Walking back to campus afterward, he was crossing an open field when a storm came up. The lightning crashed and the thunder rolled and it knocked him right to the ground. He cried out to St. Anne, promising that if she saved him, he would become a monk. Sure enough, Luther lived through the storm and kept his promise. His father was NOT happy about that!

In the monastery, "Luther threw himself wholeheartedly into efforts to achieve his own salvation. Between [the] six worship services of each day, [that all monks attended] ..., Luther sandwiched intense prayer, meditation, ... spiritual exercises," Bible reading, and lengthy confessions. He went even further and began self-flagellation – beating himself with chains – in an effort to become acceptable to God. No matter what he did, Luther just couldn't believe that he had done enough to please God. He said he was in The Troubles. He was terrified of damnation! Looking at Luther with a modern eye, we would say he was deeply depressed. He despaired not only for his life but for his very soul.

Depression or no, Luther was truly brilliant, so his supervisor in the monastery sent him back to the university to study theology this time, in part to keep Luther from going 'round the bend mentally. Besides, the local prince was building a new university in the little town of Wittenberg, and the monastery supervisor had promised the prince that he would find someone to teach theology there, so off Luther went. He earned a doctorate in record time and became a professor of the Bible, a book that even monks and priests rarely read in those days. But still, he was depressed.

Depression wasn't Luther's only ailment. If you heard this story six years ago, this is probably the only part of it you remember. I'm really sorry to tell you this. Luther was also chronically, horribly constipated, and he didn't care who knew it. He spent hours and hours in the "cloaca," as it was called, thinking about the Bible. He especially thought about Paul's letter to the Romans. That is where he was sitting when it finally hit him – salvation is a free gift of God, not something we can ever earn! Luther summarized his principles like this: Salvation comes by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. These were radical ideas in the early 1500s!

About this same time, Pope Leo X wanted to build St. Peter's Basilica, the same one you see on TV every Christmas. He began selling a lot of indulgences – sort of "get out of hell free cards," and they weren't cheap. The pope sent a man named Tetzel into Germany to sell these indulgences, to finance the construction of the basilica. Tetzel preached terrifying sermons about the tortures of hell and purgatory and then said, "As soon as the coin into the box rings, a soul from purgatory to heaven springs."

Luther's parishioners came to church showing off their indulgences, bragging that they didn't have to come to confession anymore because now they had tickets to heaven. Luther was furious that the pope was selling God's forgiveness for the people's hard-earned silver, when God was giving it away for free! He was so mad that he did what they always did in those days – he tried to set up a debate. He wrote out 95 propositions, or "theses," explaining that Tetzel was abusing the church's power and authority in selling indulgences. He marched right over to the castle church and nailed his propositions on the door so his university colleagues could see them and come to debate about them. That was on October 31, 1517, the day we celebrate as the start of the Reformation.

Well, the pope ordered Luther to stand trial, and Luther insulted the papal delegate, Johannes Eck. So, the pope wrote a long, public letter giving Luther 60 days to recant or be excommunicated. That turned out to be sort of funny, actually. The pope's representative came to town to announce the threat and – as they always did in such cases – he started a big bonfire to burn Luther's writings. So, all the students at the university joined right in, as though they were throwing more of his writings into the fire. What they were actually throwing into the fire were copies of the POPE's writings!

I have to say, if you read Luther's writings from this period, you might understand why the pope wanted to excommunicate him. Luther comes off as ... well, bull-headed and arrogant. During his 60-day grace period, he wrote a public letter to the pope, supposedly to mend fences. But Luther couldn't keep himself from adopting a tone that was just guaranteed to send the pope right up the wall. He wrote to the pope as an equal – almost like a father instructing a wayward son – explaining that the pope just had his theology all wrong, and if he would just listen to Luther, he would understand the truth.

When the 60-day grace period was up and the pope sent a representative to excommunicate Luther, the very best thing happened. All the students and faculty from the university marched out to the place where they burned the clothes of plague victims, to stop the spread of disease. There they publicly and solemnly burned the constitutional foundations of medieval Europe – the books of canon law. And Luther himself threw the papal writ of excommunication into the fire.

Excommunication supposedly decided what would happen to Luther's eternal soul, but there was still the question of earthly punishment, so there was another trial in 1521. Wouldn't you know it! There was that Johannes Eck again! He presented Luther with copies of his own writings. He asked Luther if he stood by them. You could hear a pin drop in the room. It was the moment of reckoning, and Luther could feel the threat of being burned at the stake. But he said what he had to say: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason..., I cannot and will not recant anything.... Here I stand. I can do no other. May God help me."

And there you have it: the climax of all that back and forth with the pope. With his life on the line, Luther managed to leave his arrogance aside for a moment and stand on his own integrity and the word of God. "Here I stand. I can do no other."

The Reformation was begun by Martin Luther's courageous stand, and we owe so much to the man who began it all. It is because of him that we have English language Bibles and our worship services are in English. Because of Luther, we sing hymns. Because of Luther, we understand worship to be the work of the people, not just something the priest does while we watch. Because of Luther, we know that we are all priests, permitted to approach God directly, without the intervention of the church.

So, let us return to the story of Martin Luther: After he made his dramatic stand, knowing he was condemning himself with his own words, the council declared him an outlaw and he was taken off toward prison. On the way out, however, he was kidnapped by his own prince and taken to protective custody in the castle, where he spent the next few years translating the Bible into German, writing essays, and composing hymns, including famously the one we sang a moment ago, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." And all the while, the ideas he had set loose were running like wildfire throughout Europe.

Later, when it was safe, Luther actually led a happy life, no longer beating himself with chains to make himself perfect enough for salvation, no longer in despair. He was always aware that he was a sinner, but he was even more conscious of the grace of God. He married and settled down to family life, and they say he was a lot of fun to drink beer with!

So, today – 506 years later – we celebrate the persistence of the man who kept reading the Bible until he found the good news there, and the courage of the man who stood on the word of God and spoke truth to power even when his life and his soul were at stake. We celebrate the man who learned for himself – and for us – that salvation is not something to be earned or bought, but a free gift of God's own grace.

And for this I say, "Thanks be to God!"

AMEN