

Sunday October 26th

Readings

Jeremiah 31:31-34

31The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. **32** It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. **33** But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. **34** No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Psalm 46

1 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. **2** Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; **3** though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. (Selah) **4** There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. **5** God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. **6** The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. **7** The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. (Selah) **8** Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. **9** He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. **10** "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." **11** The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Romans 3:19-28

19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. **20** For "no human being will be justified in his sight" by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. **21** But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, **22** the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, **23** since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; **24** they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, **25** whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; **26** it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. **27** Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. **28** For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

John 8:31-36

31 Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; **32** and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." **33** They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" **34** Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. **35** The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. **36** So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

Here, today, we celebrate Reformation Sunday. Now, it's a bit weird because Martin Luther actually nailed the 95 Theses to the door of Wittenburg's Castle Church on October 31st of 1517. But since we celebrate All Saints' Day on the Sunday after Halloween, we end up celebrating Reformation Sunday the week before. What that boils down to for us is that we get two weeks to party. So huzzah!

As many of you know, this is sort of the company holiday. Across the world, Lutherans celebrate Reformation Sunday like Butterball celebrates

Thanksgiving. It's our bread and butter, or turkey for that matter. Without the Reformation, we wouldn't exist as we do. Our heritage is born out of the tense time where theologians sought to correct mistakes within the church's teaching, where the Holy Spirit inspired people to recognize God's forgiveness free of any requirements, apart from any law. We celebrate the Reformation because, within that historical matrix of anxiety, Martin Luther reintroduced the world to God's covenant of free grace.

But, we have to remember that reform is part of the Reformation process. We, as people of the Reformation, cannot remain unchanged. And if we do, we've left the Reformation far, far behind.

This Jeremiah text is an incredible reading for Reformation Sunday. Simply amazing. We hear the language of new covenant, of God's word written on our hearts, of God being our God and us being God's people. That's it. And that's good.

Well, what if I told you it's also incredible because of Jeremiah's context. We have to remember that Jeremiah was a prophet who wrote in the midst of Israel's demise into exile. What might that look like?

Imagine with me, for just a second, Jeremiah's setting. He's writing from the rubble of a lost war. His people are conquered, some fleeing for asylum in Egypt, others being carried off as exiles to Babylon, and some left to eek out a life amidst the scorched earth of Jerusalem. Jeremiah writes as a prophet who

is seeing first hand the destruction of God's city. Even the Holy of Holies – the very center of the Jerusalem temple – lies in waste with the rest of God's house, crumbled into a pile of ashes and broken masonry. The covenant that God made with Noah and Abraham and David, of an everlasting blessing and neverending kingdom, seems all for naught, as battered as Judah's armies, as shattered as God's own house.

Perhaps the worst part of this situation is this new oracle presented by Jeremiah. To our Christian ears, Jeremiah's news of total forgiveness and the promise of grace in the face sin entice us, inspire us, provoke us to think of these words only from a place of glory, a place of resurrection, a place of fulfillment of that

old covenant, a place of Reformation. But Jeremiah's words come from a place of apparent abandonment, of fear that God no longer intends to stay faithful to the covenant promises. In the midst of such fears, Jeremiah's words cut to the quick of the heart: a new covenant is coming, and to us, it is unlike the old one, where God held our hand through wilderness and promised steadfast love. Unlike the covenant that held God's continued faithfulness despite our transgressions. A *new* covenant where the people might actually know God...This is the twist of the linguistic knife, because the implication is that Israel and Judah did not in fact know God, or at the very least not as well as they thought they knew the Lord. And that is just too much.

It's too much because this language of *new covenant* is unique. This is the only Old Testament reference to a new covenant. At this point in the life of Israel, a new covenant signified a dangerous concept, especially in the midst of a broken Jerusalem. The loss of the temple, of the Ark of the Covenant, seemed to represent the departure of God's favor, and the word of hope that Jeremiah here offers is of a *new covenant*? What hope is there in the apparent loss of identity, in the revocation of the old covenant to which we clung so strong?

The celebration of Reformation is often glossed over as a triumphal moment in history, but if we're honest with ourselves, the Reformation of the 16th century was much more complex, just as the

constant reformations within our own lives involve more than simple celebration. In times of Reformation, we join Jeremiah to sit in the clutter of our old lives, wondering just what it is that God is up to, wondering whether we've somehow lost God's presence with us. We might feel this in the life of a church, with budget issues and leadership transitions and changes in worship. This might be in our jobs, where constant conflict with our peers or constant change in the responsibility taints the joy we once had in our occupations. This might be in our personal lives, for as we face illness and death, financial hardship and loneliness, we wonder whether God can really be with us and for us in the midst of this all. Luther and his contemporaries faced this as they

suffered persecution at the hands church authorities and as popular misunderstandings distorted their teachings. The Reformation was a time not only of joyous transition, but of tragic conflict. Lives were lost. Kingdoms fell. Reformation is a desperately difficult movement of the Holy Spirit, then and now.

But let us be clear. Reformation, that transition toward the good in all of life's situations, is not the revocation of God's promise, but the restoration of our participation in God's everlasting love. When we experience a new covenant with God, we must remember that covenant is only new to us. The work of God in Christ is radical. It requires something of us. It requires those with authority to share that power with others. The Holy Spirit, rather than always work

through the establishment, instead inhabits the most unlikely of individuals and causes movements to rise up. In those times of newness, we sit in the midst of the transition, lamenting the loss of what used to be.

But also with Jeremiah, we can take hold of this frightening promise of a new covenant. It's frightening precisely because it is new. We don't know what it looks like yet. And so we are afraid.

But we do know the one who makes the promises. The one who has always been faithful. We know that God, the God who once led us to our Promised Lands, who inspired us with life and love, who changed our lives forever, will also bring life and love out of the tragedies we face. God will change our lives again. This is the promise of the Reformation:

That God reformed us and will always reform us! God will not abandon us when we don't understand the work of the Holy Spirit. God will not abandon us when we fear we're all alone. God will not abandon us when the city falls around us, nor when the church we grew up in changes, nor when our spouse leaves us, nor when the cancer metastasizes. God will not abandon us because God is the God of promise.

This week as we continued our new discipleship group with Highlander Lutherans, we began a Bible study on seeing God at work in the world. One insight that arose within our discussion is that the Christian life requires learning how to live life anew just as much as it requires unlearning how we lived life in the past. We must unlearn our destructive habits, our ineffective

approaches to work, our unhelpful relationship tendencies, our false beliefs, our deceitful actions. And we must be reformed. That is, perhaps, the most helpful image I've come across to really communicate what reformation is all about. We not only need to learn new ways of life. We must also unlearn the old ways that no longer fit within our present contexts.

That is true reformation, and in that, God's promise and faithfulness stay the same. The covenant only seems new to us because we must unlearn the old ways, those things that seem so comfortable. But out of our discomfort, the everlasting love of God comes once again to us, like a breath of fresh air, like a new covenant.

God is faithful. Ever faithful. Always faithful. Even in the midst of a fallen Jerusalem. Even in the crumbling towers of our own lives. Reformation is the promise that God will rebuild the city, that God will restore goodness in our lives, because God is a God who is always reforming who we are, always active in transforming us for the good. God is a God of reformation. God is always involved in our lives and always, somehow, some way, even if we do not see it, working for the good. That is the promise of Reformation Day. Amen.