

Sermon – John 8:31-36; Psalm 46
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Reformation – Year A
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“A Reforming Fortress”

Sisters and brothers, friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I first visited Wittenberg in 2002. A friend and I were hostel hopping our way through northeast Germany and I insisted on visiting the epicenter of the Lutheran Reformation because, well, I was about to be a Lutheran pastor. I'm not sure how enjoyable Wittenberg is for folks who aren't Lutheran pilgrims, though you don't have to be a Lutheran to enjoy the best bratwurst this side of the Oder. But for Lutherans, the town is a treasure. From the statues of Luther and Melanchthon in the market square to the two main churches, St. Mary's and the *Schlosskirche*; from the Luther House to Cranach's workshop, the town is a living testament to our heritage and history. Most visitors don't spend more than a day in town, maybe two at most. The Luther sites can be seen in quick succession and, if you're not looking for more, they present little more than a snapshot in time; a frozen moment in which we observe our triumphant forbears in the faith. This impression was heightened on my next visit, when I returned with my family in 2014. The town was scaffolded from top to bottom, getting a new coat of everything for the upcoming 500th anniversary of the Reformation. On this visit, however, I stayed long enough to see more deeply. Spending two weeks in the town, I got to know the side streets and hidden restaurants and, even better, the people within them. I also learned Wittenberg doesn't have a single laundromat, which is interesting when one has three small children in tow, but I digress. The point is that I discovered Wittenberg as a living place, not a museum. It always has

been, of course. Katie and Martin Luther, Melanchthon and Cranach, and all the rest were not heroes frozen in stone or time. They were, first and foremost, who we are. They were people of God who lived in and through the time in which they found themselves. Not oil paintings and statues erected after the fact, but flesh and blood living in the moment.

2. As people living in that moment, life was not always easy. It's no surprise that Psalm 46 was the basis for Luther's greatest hymn, "A Mighty Fortress." The psalmist begins by noting that God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, but there is no doubt that the people *are* in trouble. Nations rage and kingdoms wage war; the mountains shake and the waters rage. As for the psalmist, so for the reformers. When Luther nailed his theses to the church doors in 1517, his fight was not only theological, it was about justice in the face of oppression. The sale of indulgences by Rome kept captive not only the soul but the body, keeping the poorest poor while the elite lined their pockets. Within a decade, the world would begin to unravel. A new emperor, Charles V, ascended to the throne. The bubonic plague came to Germany. The Ottoman invasion reached the gates of Vienna. One can forgive Luther for believing he was living in the end times. But it was precisely here, amid the storms, that the reformers were led back to the scriptures, the life-giving source of our faith; *ad fontes* as the saying goes.
3. Luther was driven back to Romans and its promise of freedom and forgiveness, its promise that when the world is overwhelming and we have failed, God in Christ is simply enough: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." In contradistinction to other reformers, the Wittenbergers' argument was not founded in anything so simple as human depravity overcome by God's purity. No, Luther didn't think that people are absolutely evil; he saw, rather, that on our own we are absolutely without hope. Whether we act righteously or evilly, for good or for bad, in

any particular moment, we are bound. We are caught up in sin and death and cannot free ourselves. It's not that we never do good; it's that even the best we do cannot overturn the powers that oppress us, within and without. We, like those with whom Jesus speaks in John 8, can pretend we've never been captives. But it's a lie. We are bound and cannot free ourselves. We need release, a freedom that can only come from outside ourselves.

4. Freedom is what Jesus comes to give. In a world of lies, half-truths, and mere truthiness, Jesus comes with the Truth. It's a double-edged sword. The first truth is that we are sinners, bound to this world's ways of death; we will find no way out on our own. But the second truth, gospel following hard upon the law, is pure grace. We are *not* on our own. Through the cross of Christ and his empty tomb we have been shown the way out before we thought to look for it. We who were homeless are suddenly given a place in the household. Only the Son can make you free, and he has made you free indeed.
5. As for the psalmist and the reformers, so for us. We live in a world where kingdoms rage and waters rise. Reformation Sunday presents us with a moment to remember those who kept faith in the midst of life's storms, not only after the storms had passed. We do not yet live as ones who have defeated the COVID-19 pandemic, but as those who struggle day to day as things continue to deteriorate. We live not from the point of having vanquished this foe but as those who strive against it. As the people of God set free in the truth of Christ, we use our freedom not to do whatever we want to do, but to do what our neighbor needs us to do for their well-being. We wear masks. We stay apart, even when we yearn to be together. We also do not live as ones who have overcome the pandemic of racism, but as those who live trapped within it. We are not yet free of this scourge, so we claim the freedom to decenter ourselves, to silence our voices so that Christ can speak to us through People of Color; so that we can hear truth anew. We do all of this as we edge closer to an election that serves as a reminder of how

deeply divided we are in so many ways. As people given refuge and shelter in God, we give thanks that our unity is not found through our own efforts, our own attempts to create truth or agreement. Our unity is given to us by God for the sake of Jesus Christ and it cannot be wrenched away.

6. This morning, we praise God for being our fortress, our stronghold. This does not mean, however, that we are a closed-door museum to times gone by. Instead, we have room to continue being reformed, molded anew to more closely align with God's purposes. I am mindful of Luther's bold claim in his 1520 treatise, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, in which he writes: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none." And, he continues, "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." You, Christian friends, have been fully freed from sin and death by Jesus Christ. Your place in God's household is secure forever. But being set free *from* sin and evil, you are set free *for* the sake of your neighbor, for one another, wherever you find yourselves. God, Luther reminds us, does not need your good works, but your neighbor does. During these challenging, anxious days, look out for one another; take care of one another. And do so with hope. The gift of the gospel lives within you, a new covenant written upon your hearts, as you live during these days. We are not yet on the other side. Mountains shake and waters roar; the nations are in an uproar. But God speaks that little word, "Be still!" In the stillness, Christ stands before us with freedom, the gracious invitation to continue in his Word. We know not fully what storms we will have to endure, but we know that we are sheltered by God and set free to do God's work as living witnesses of Christ's love for this world. You are free; continue in Christ's Word. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.