

## REFORMATION

### Friedens Evangelical Lutheran Church

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Worship 9:00 AM • Sunday School/Bible Class 10:15 AM

Member of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

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### **Part 1 THE NEED FOR REFORM**

#### ***The Religious Climate before the Reformation***

The Christian Church at the beginning of the sixteenth century, at the close of the dark ages, was badly in need of reform. The church based in Rome was not communicating God's gospel to the world. The Bible was available only in the languages that scholars could understand, and even then, the Bible was used less than the writings and traditions of the early church fathers. It was considered dangerous for lay people to read the Bible. The Roman Church was more active in political endeavors than it was in spiritual endeavors. People honored relics more than Jesus Christ Himself. The good news of great joy in Jesus Christ was buried under the bad news of more sins, more money, more sacrifices, and more rules as the church taught salvation through the keeping of the laws of God. In addition to a myriad of laws the church imposed even more, and taught that no one should be certain of having eternal life. Thus the real message of Scripture, that Jesus Christ is the only Savior for sinful mankind, was not being communicated to the world.

A reformation was needed, that is, a change which would correct the wrongs which had overtaken the church. God saw that need. And just as God raised up the prophets of old to reform His chosen people in the Old Testament era, just as God called the Apostle Paul so that the light of the gospel could shine into the hearts of all people, so now would God raise up a church reformer. It would be a reformer, who, like the prophets and apostles of old, would not seek recognition for himself, but only for Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of all mankind. Martin Luther captured the religious climate prior to the Reformation in the words of his hymn, "O Lord, Look Down From Heaven, Behold." This is one of his earliest hymns. It was written in 1523 when the Reformation had swung into high gear.

## Part 2 THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS WAS OBSCURED BY THE ROMAN CHURCH

### *Luther's Early Life and Spiritual Turmoil*

On November 10, 1483, at Eisleben, Germany, a child was born who would have the greatest effect on Christianity of anyone since Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul. His name was Martin Luder--which he later changed to Luther--the son of peasants. His father was a laborer in the copper mines of the Harz Mountains. The baby was baptized the day after his birth, on St. Martin's Day. As he grew, it quickly became apparent that young Martin had exceptional gifts.

### *What kind of man was Luther?*

He has been described by scholars as a man that felt things deeply. He had feelings for people and things around him. He was not the kind of monk to crawl into his shell and isolate himself from the world. Life to Luther was a serious business, for he had strong convictions of right and wrong. He made decisions readily on the basis of conscience, a conscience bound by the Word of God. He revealed a strong loyalty both to his principles and to people he felt deserving of it.

Strong drives made him tackle a task vigorously and sometimes impetuously, with lots of confidence in his ability to see the job through. His accomplishments were due, perhaps, more to energy and conviction than to being well organized. He did not attain leadership and prominence through a desire for responsibility or self-importance but rather through a dogged, energetic pursuit of his ideals. It was more important to Luther to satisfy his conscience than to gain fame or fortune.

He did not always handle people with kid gloves. One always knew exactly where one stood with Martin, and at times he was prone to lose his temper. He did not seek popularity, but was the kind of man who would attract loyal friends and followers. It is generally agreed that he would have made a poor church politician had he lived in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because he was much too straight-forward and truthful.

After his elementary training, he entered the University of Erfurt, Germany, where he excelled in studies of classical literature and philosophy. "The Learned Philosopher," as he was called by his fellow students, planned for a career in law. But his plans ended abruptly. When he reached the age of 22, traumatic events surrounding the death of a friend and his own near death led Luther to make a vow to St. Anne to enter the quiet life of the monastery.

Luther entered the Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt. There he engaged in further studies and was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1507. A year later he accepted a call to teach at the new University of Wittenberg. In 1512 Luther received his Doctor of Divinity degree, after which he accepted a permanent faculty position. Holding this position, Luther began what we know today as "the Reformation."

While preparing his lectures on the Psalms and on the Epistle to the Romans he began to grasp what God was saying in the Bible. The more Luther studied the Bible the more troubled he became. The theology of the Roman Church, of which he was officially a monk, conflicted with the message of the Bible. Luther couldn't justify his church's teaching that salvation depended on the keeping of the law when he read such words of Scripture as:

Acts 15:10-11 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are. (NIV)

Habakkuk 2:4 Behold the proud, His soul is not upright in him; But the just shall live by his faith. (NKJV)

### Part 3 LUTHER DISCOVERS JESUS CHRIST AS HIS SAVIOR

#### *Paul's Epistle to the Romans Relieves Luther's Spiritual Turmoil*

Two important sections of Scripture that opened up for Luther a clear understanding of God's grace and salvation for all mankind were Romans 1:16,17 and Romans 3:19-28. These portions of Scripture serve as our readings on this Festival Sunday.

Romans 1:16-17 <sup>16</sup> I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. <sup>17</sup> For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, <sup>[c]</sup> just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." (NIV)

Romans 3:19-28 <sup>19</sup> Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

<sup>21</sup> But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, <sup>[i]</sup> through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— <sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

<sup>27</sup> Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. <sup>28</sup> For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. (NIV)

The impact of these Scriptures upon Luther is best shown by Luther's own comments on them:

I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, the justice of God, because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage Him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against Him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that the just shall live by his faith. Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us (He declares us forgiven) through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the justice 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....

If you have a true faith that Christ is your Savior, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. Thus it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon His fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness. He who sees God as angry does not see Him rightly but looks only on a curtain, as if a dark cloud had been drawn across His face.

Luther's discovery of this Bible truth and assurance in Christ is also seen in the joy he exhibits in verses 4-7 of his hymn, "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice." Let's join our hearts and voices in singing them.

## Part 4 REFORMATION -- A MATTER OF OBEDIENCE TO GOD

### *The Reformation Begins*

Martin Luther tested, weighed, proved and compared. He read the writings of the church fathers. He locked himself in the Scriptures and prayed for enlightenment. He found that in many places the word of the church contradicted God's Word.

He hoped a pilgrimage to Rome would assure him that his church at its center was something better and different from what he found at the edges. But it wasn't! His utter disappointment triggered more study and careful research.

What finally brought Luther's Reformation to a head was the arrival of the Catholic monk John Tetzel in the vicinity of Wittenberg. In Rome Pope Leo X wanted to finish St. Peter's Cathedral. To raise money for the project, he sent Tetzel throughout Germany to sell indulgences. The indulgences were supposed to spare people from the punishment after death in an imaginary place named purgatory. Members of the congregation where Luther was preaching also bought these indulgences. Because so many of them believed that in buying indulgences they were actually buying the forgiveness of sins, Luther wrote up a set of propositions for debate on the questions of forgiveness through indulgences. On October 31, 1517, Luther expressed himself in 95 sentences and paragraphs known today as the 95 Theses. He tacked them to the bulletin board on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The 95 theses caught on. The printers translated them into German, reproduced them, and copies spread from person to person, village to village. **THE REFORMATION HAD BEGUN!**

During the following years, the pope ordered Luther to recant and placed him under "suspicion of heresy." There were discussions with the Papal emissary, whose name was John Eck, Cardinal Cajetan, and others. At one point, Luther actually promised to cease his criticism of the Catholic Church in the hope that its abuses would be corrected. But when he was attacked for his stand on the Bible as the sole authority in the Church, he spoke forth again. The pope excommunicated Luther in June of 1520, and on December 10, 1520, Luther publicly burned his copy of the Papal Bull, the official document which announced his excommunication. Upon the call of Emperor Charles V, Luther came to the Diet (Legislative Assembly) in the city of Worms, Germany to answer certain charges. Asked simply to take back everything that he had written against the teaching of the Roman Church, Luther replied:

Unless you can prove from the Bible and sound reason that I have made wrong statements and have spoken contrary to God's Word, I refuse to recant. My conscience is bound in the Word of God. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me! Amen.

These words of Martin Luther did not come easy; nor did they come hastily. He also realized the seriousness of the situation. But he also had learned the truth of Scripture and felt constrained to obey God rather than men. To show the gravity of the situation as Luther approached the assembly at Worms, I invite you to listen to the prayer which he offered to God just before the Diet convened:

O almighty and everlasting God, how terrible this world! Behold it opens its mouth to swallow me up, and I have so little trust in you. How weak the flesh, and Satan, how strong! If only in the strength of this world I must put my trust, all is over. My last hour is come, my condemnation has been pronounced...

O God, O God!... O God, help me against all the wisdom of the world.

Do this! You should do this... You alone. For this is not my work, but Yours. I have nothing to do here, nothing to contend for with these great ones of the world.

I wish that my days would flow along peaceful and happy, but the cause is Yours... and it is a righteous and eternal cause. O Lord, help me! Faithful and unchangeable God, I place my trust in no man. It would be in vain all that is of man is uncertain All that comes of man fails.

O God, my God, don't You hear me? My God, are You dead? No, You cannot die. You're only hiding Yourself. You have chosen me for this work. I know it well... Act then, O God,... stand at my side, for the sake of Your well-beloved Jesus Christ, who is my Defense, my Shield, and my Strong Tower.

After a moment of silent struggle Luther continued:

Lord, where do You keep Yourself? O my God, where are You? Come, come, I am ready.... I am ready to lay down my life for your truth... patient as a lamb, for it is the cause of justice, it is yours.... I will never separate myself from You, not now nor through eternity.

And though the world should be filled with devils -- though my body, which is still the work of your hands, should be slain, be stretched upon the pavement, be cut to pieces, reduced to ashes... my soul is Yours. Your Word is my assurance. My soul belongs to You and shall abide with you forever.... Amen. O God, help me! Amen.

Luther's greatest hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," is based on Psalm 46. Luther is reputed to have written the hymn after going into a deep depression caused by learning that his friend, Leonard Kaiser, had been burned at the stake in the Netherlands for refusing to recant, while Luther himself was safe at home in his own bed. Composers have since made extensive use of the hymn. Bach used it in his cantata number 80. Mendelssohn made the tune the theme of the final movement of his fifth symphony, the "Reformation" Symphony. Wagner used it in his Kaisermarsch. The hymn was not widely sung in English until the nineteenth century. However, by 1900, not only had it been translated into 53 languages, but 63 English versions had appeared.

**Part 5 REFORMATION -- A GREAT GIFT**  
*Martin Luther Leads the Church to Glorify God*

Upon leaving the Diet at Worms, Luther's friend, Elector Frederick, a high official of the empire, had Luther kidnapped and secretly taken to the Wartburg Castle for the sake of protecting Luther from the Catholic leaders who wanted him killed. While in seclusion at the Wartburg, Luther began and completed the translation of the New Testament in 1522 from the original Greek into his people's language, German. With the Word in the hands of the laity there was no stopping the Reformation. In 1529 Luther published the Small Catechism, a summary of Christian teaching for both children and adults. In 1530 laymen and theologians, "Lutherans" their enemies called them, gave the world the Augsburg Confession, a series of 28 declarations of the Christian faith that to this day is considered the chief confession by all Evangelical Lutherans. Written largely by Philip Melancton, a close co-worker of Luther's, it breathes the spirit of Luther.

In 1534 he published the entire Bible in German, having completed his translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew. The extent to which Luther wrote is remarkable. A modern *abbreviated* set of Luther's Works numbers 55 volumes, and each volume averages more than 400 pages!

Because you are singing today, thank God for what he worked through Luther. Whenever we sing as a congregation in church, we participate in one of Luther's greatest contributions: he restored the gift of song to the people in their own language as part of their worship. He said, I intend to make German Psalms for the people, [that is], spiritual songs so that the Word of God, even by means of song, may live among the people.

It is for good reason that Luther has been called the father of congregational song. For over a thousand years between the Council of Laodicea in the fourth century and the birth of the Reformation, the people had not sung in church; only the clergy sang the music. Hymns in the language of the people were allowed only for special occasions, but even these were generally outside of the sanctuary.

A prominent sixteenth-century Catholic priest angrily wrote, "Luther has damned more souls with his hymns than with all his sermons." In fact, historians note that Luther's hymns were more significant than the printed word in spreading the Reformation. Few people have read his pulpit sermons, but his sermons through hymns continue to be preached every Sunday throughout the world, as they have for almost five centuries. Today we take congregational singing for granted -- it is part of our earliest church-going experiences. The people of Luther's time had no such heritage.

In 1525 Luther married Catherine von Bora, and the union was blessed with three sons and three daughters. When he lay dying on February 18, 1546, at the age of 62 in Eisleben (where he was born), his friend Justus Jonas asked, "Reverend father, are you willing to die in the name of Christ and upon the doctrine which you have preached?" "YES," answered Luther. Martin Luther died in the knowledge and hope of Jesus Christ, the Savior that he had reintroduced to the world. Martin Luther's reformation placed the Bible back into the hands of the people -- into your hands, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31). God richly blessed his church through Martin Luther.