

MARTIN LUTHER

*A sermon preached at St. John's and St. Michael and All Angels' Episcopal churches on
October 29, 2017 by the Rev. John McDermott*

- 1 God is our refuge and strength, *
a very present help in trouble.
- 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved, *
and though the mountains be toppled into the depths of the sea;
- 3 Though its waters rage and foam, *
and though the mountains tremble at its tumult.
- 4 The LORD of hosts is with us; *
the God of Jacob is our stronghold. [Psalm 46]

This is the text from today's psalm that Luther paraphrased to create the opening of his famous hymn: "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing, our helper he amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing."

On October 31 we will observe the 500th anniversary of one of the most important events in the history of Christianity, Martin Luther's posting of 95 theses to debate on a church door, a simple act which, it turned out, launched the Protestant Reformation.

How is it that the Protestant Reformation in general and Luther in particular matter to us? Is this a Protestant church? The set-up of the altar, the vestments, even the wording of the service are very similar to what you might encounter in a typical Catholic Church. You know, if somehow you just woke up in the midst of one service or the other, it might take you a bit to figure out which kind of church you were in.

The Episcopal Church certainly is a product of the Protestant Reformation. The author of much of the Prayer Book we use in our worship, Archbishop Cranmer, was burned at the stake because of his Protestant beliefs, and "Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America" is one of the denomination's official names. That's quite a mouthful, so "The Episcopal Church" is the other official name and gets a lot more use. But with or without the Protestant moniker this church adheres to basic principles of Protestantism that became established through Luther's work. So, what was Luther up to and what were his basic principles?

In some ways Luther was a kind of latter-day St. Paul. He was an extremist in one form of faith who then essentially established a new belief system. His work was a radical challenge to the dominant religion he grew up in. He was not ordained by others for his work. His inspiration came directly from God, and his followers accepted this as a fact. Like Paul he even

had a “Damascus road” conversion experience. In Luther’s case, as a young man already advanced in the study of law and philosophy, while on the road, not to Damascus but to his school at Erfurt, he was nearly killed by a bolt of lightning and swore at that moment to give up his plans to become a lawyer and instead enter a monastery.

So Luther became a monk, an Augustinian, and a very serious monk he was. In his monastery in the little town of Wittenberg—it’s in Saxony in eastern Germany—Luther, wracked by feelings of guilt and fearing the judgment of God, strove to outdo all the other monks in fasting and other acts of penance. People feared he was wasting away. There was a newly-founded university in Wittenberg—Shakespeare makes Hamlet an alumnus!—and there Luther became a serious student of theology and especially of the study of the Bible. In due course he became both a priest and a Doctor of Divinity, a professor of Scriptural studies and author of a commentary on St. Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans*.

As he studied Paul, Luther began to find relief from the tremendous burden of guilt he felt before God; he began to understand God’s unmerited love. This sentence from today’s second reading was pretty much Luther’s favorite in the whole Bible: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” [Romans 3:28] Later when Luther translated this passage into German he couldn’t resist making it read that a person is justified by “faith alone,” just to make sure you got the point. In his own words: “Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by faith.’ Then I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.” This insight, that we do not get right with God, we do not earn our way into Heaven, by our good deeds, but that God’s love reaches out to us and we respond in gratitude and faith, this insight, in traditional language, “justification by faith,” is the founding belief that empowered Luther in all that he did.

In 1517 Luther was 34 years old, an important man in his small world. He was a lecturer and writer, he preached both at the monastery and in a parish church, he oversaw eleven other monasteries, he was even superintendant of a fish pond! Clearly people counted on him as someone who could get things done.

Over time he had become increasingly concerned about the fact that agents of the Church were going around Germany telling people that a money payment could lessen the time they or their dear departed relatives would have to suffer punishment for their sins after death. You paid your money and a Church official handed you what was called an indulgence, a paper that specified so many years off from Purgatory, not for good behavior but for cash on the barrelhead. The Pope’s authority stood behind this, and a lot of the money collected was going to pay for the rebuilding of St. Peter’s in Rome.

If, as Luther had come to believe, you couldn’t earn your way into Heaven through acts of fasting and prayer, you certainly couldn’t buy your way in through purchasing indulgences. Now Luther didn’t go around giving speeches to denounce the sale of indulgences; he was a professor, not a rabble-rouser. He drew up a list of his objections, 95 of them, in Latin yet, and

posted them as an invitation to debate with other academics. He posted them on the church door which served as a kind of public notice board.

Here's a sample of the positions Luther was proposing to debate: "Indulgences are positively harmful to the recipient because they impede salvation by diverting charity and inducing a false sense of security...He who spends his money for indulgences instead of relieving [the poor] receives not the indulgence of the pope but the indignation of God...Did Christ say, 'Let him that has a cloak sell it and buy an indulgence'?"

The day he chose to post his list, October 31, was significant. Don't think Halloween with ghosts and goblins. Think All-Hallows Eve, the eve of All Saints Day, like Christmas Eve, a holy time, especially in Wittenberg where the local ruler, Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, had a huge collection of holy relics which he displayed to the public on All Saints Day. When I say huge, I mean huge. Frederick's collection came to include some 19,000 items. Among them were a thorn from Christ's crown of thorns, a tooth of St. Jerome, 4 hairs from the Virgin Mary, a wisp of straw from the manger in Bethlehem, and a strand of Jesus' beard. And, speaking of indulgences, it was established that if you viewed this collection on All Saints Day and made a monetary contribution, you could receive time off from Purgatory of up to 1,902,202 years and 270 days! People gave a lot of thought to this sort of thing back then. At least this money stayed in Wittenberg.

So a professor in an obscure university in a tiny town posts in Latin a list of 95 topics to debate, and two years later he's famous throughout Germany and beyond, and the Pope himself is sending high-ranking emissaries to deal with him. What's going on here? Clearly Luther inadvertently had tossed a lighted match into a keg of gunpowder.

Luther himself took no steps to spread his theses. The debate he proposed never took place, but what happened was that the theses themselves were translated into German, printed, and distributed far and wide. By this time printing presses were well established, and in a short time Luther's ideas were being discussed all over Germany. People were sick of German money being siphoned off to Rome to build St. Peter's, and Luther had given them a set of talking points.

In a couple of years, then, Luther was a famous man. His ruler, Frederick the Wise, stood behind him—looking after a local boy who had made good, so to speak—so he wasn't just whisked away to be burned at the stake as were reformers before and after him. Instead confrontations with various authorities were arranged in the hope he would change his mind, or at least be made to look foolish.

Here's a description of Luther at this time of his life: "Martin is of middle height, emaciated from care and study, so that you can almost count his bones through his skin. He is in the vigor of manhood and has a clear, penetrating voice. He is learned and has the Scripture at his fingers' ends...A perfect forest of words and ideas stands at his command. He is affable

and friendly, in no sense dour or arrogant. He is equal to anything. In company he is vivacious, jocular, and always cheerful...no matter how hard his adversaries press him.”

Luther’s confrontations with authority climaxed in 1521 at the—unfortunately named from an English speaker’s point of view—Diet of Worms. This was a grand convocation involving all kinds of pomp and ceremony. All the rulers of Germany were there, and the Holy Roman Emperor himself, Charles V, presided. Luther was called on to recant his beliefs, and his final statement is recorded:

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in [Church] councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other. May God help me. Amen.”

At this point Luther was in very hot water indeed, and Frederick the Wise had him whisked away and hidden in a remote castle. There Luther stayed for over a year. The time was not wasted. He wrote extensively on his developing views of the faith, and, very importantly, he translated the whole New Testament from the original Greek into German. He later, with some help, completed a translation of the Old Testament, and his Bible version is the source of German as a unified national language.

It became clear that Luther’s vision of a reformed Christianity was based on three foundation principles. The first was justification by faith. The second was, as he indicated in his statement at Worms, that fundamental Church doctrine must be based on the Bible. The Episcopal Church takes this idea very seriously. In our ordination service as priests, the only specific doctrine that Amanda and I have sworn to, both orally and by signing a written statement, is that we believe “the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to Salvation.” This assertion sets the Episcopal Church apart from the Roman Catholic Church which does consider fundamental some beliefs, such as the infallibility of the Pope and the assumption of the Virgin Mary into Heaven, that definitely are not found in the Bible.

Luther’s third foundation principle may be the most important of all in distinguishing us from Roman Catholics. It is usually stated as “the priesthood of all believers.”

I have a son-in-law, Nathan, who is a serious Roman Catholic born and bred. At this point it’s probably safe to say he’s more Catholic than the pope. He was a big fan of Pope Benedict. Pope Francis...not so much. Nathan and I have a live and let live attitude when it comes to religion, but one day, out of the blue, he asked me what was the most important difference between Catholic & Protestant. I didn’t have a pat answer filed away for that, but after a bit of hesitation what came to me was that the essential difference between them was the

Protestant belief that each Christian, each one of us, has direct access to God without the mediation of clergy or the rites of the Church.

I think I got that right. That really may be the most important difference. If you define “priests” as those who have some kind of special access to God, then in this church we all are, in some sense, priests. Hence the phrase, “priesthood of all believers,” is a pillar of Protestant faith. Luther believed the concept, and it first became widely accepted through his teaching. Priests in the Episcopal Church have special functions in worship, but they don’t have special standing before God. Amanda and I are not members of some kind of sacred caste. Our worship is the worship of a community, we all have a necessary role to play in it, and as a community we are all equal in God’s eyes.

Luther returned to Wittenberg and lived the rest of his life there. He wrote endlessly in support of his reforming beliefs. We have, for example, 2,300 sermons from him. He saw the Protestant movement develop in many directions. He didn’t like some of them. He was at heart a social conservative, respectful of the government. He was also a conservative in matters of worship. In particular he held the Eucharist in the highest esteem. This essential conservatism appealed to the reformers who established the Church of England in the mid-1500s, and Luther had great influence on them. In time he entered into a happy marriage and he and his wife had six children. He died at the age of 62. He was not a martyr, and he would not have wanted to be called a saint.

A final word. Luther loved music. He wrote: “Next after theology I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor. I would not exchange what little I know of music for something great. Experience proves that next to the Word of God only music deserves to be extolled as the mistress and governess of the feelings of the human heart.”

It was Luther who introduced hymns to be sung by the whole congregation, something which ever since has been a hallmark of Protestant worship. It is an enduring legacy. It certainly is the perfect illustration of his concept of the priesthood of all believers. Before Luther only the ordained, the professionals, could make music in God’s house. Luther saw that we all together could raise our voices and together create a heartfelt offering of music that would indeed be acceptable in the Lord’s eyes.

I want to end with some stanzas of an English version of the poetic paraphrase of the Lord’s Prayer Luther created to use as a hymn. The tune he used for this hymn, *Vater unser in Himmelreich*, is found in our Hymnal.

Let us pray.

Our Father, Thou in heav'n above,
Who biddest us to dwell in love,
As brethren of one family,
And cry for all we need to Thee;

Teach us to mean the words we say,
And from the inmost heart to pray.

All hallowed be Thy name, O Lord!
O let us firmly keep Thy Word,
And lead, according to Thy name,
A holy life, untouched by blame;
Let no false teachings do us hurt;
All poor deluded souls convert.

Give us this day our daily bread,
Let us be duly clothed and fed;
And keep Thou from our homes afar
Famine and pestilence and war,
That we may live in godly peace
Unvexed by cares and avarice.

Amen! That is, so shall it be!
Strengthen our faith and trust in Thee
That we may doubt not, but believe
That what we ask we shall receive.
Thus in Thy name and at Thy word
We say [again, "Amen."]

S. D. G.

Most of the information about Luther in this sermon comes from the classic and readable biography, *Here I Stand*, by Roland H. Bainton.