

Living Reformation
Reformation Sunday
October 28, 2012
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Texts: Job 42.1-6, 10-17;
 Psalm 34.1-8, 19-22;
 Hebrews 7.23-28;
 Mark 10.46-52

On October 31, 1517 a confident young professor marched up to the Wittenberg Church and nailed 95 theses to the door. With this litany of complaint, Martin Luther unwittingly began what we call the Protestant Reformation. I suppose I am speculating a bit when I narrate the story as I do. I don't know whether Martin Luther was confident as he called the church to account on that day. But you do have to have a fair bit of confidence to make such a bold move.

We look back to this moment as the beginning of a reformation that sweeps across the whole western Christian church not only giving birth to the protestant church of which we are a part but sparking a reformation within the Roman Catholic church as well. We celebrate Reformation Sunday not just because we care about history but because it calls us to continue the *work* of reformation. The credo of this movement is to be always reforming according to the Word of God.

Today I want to explore with you where reformation really comes from - where it starts. As I said, we commemorate the start of the reformation with the clarity and confidence of Luther's convictions. But he would never have come to that place of conviction and clarity had it not been for a long season of struggle and suffering. During my reading week, I worked my way through a rather complicated and dense book entitled Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews. I am still digesting all that was presented in the book. People have asked me to share the central idea of it and each time I try I say something completely different. Not contradictory but simply one more aspect of the argument. I don't have an elevator speech for this one yet. But a central concern for the author of the book is how we remain open to the ongoing work of God's Spirit to reform and repair what is broken in the world and especially in the church. As I listened to his description, I am convinced that he is correct and it leads me to locate the origin of reformation in a very different story about Martin Luther than the one we typically tell on this day.

Certainly the protestant reformation is born from the intersection of a complex range of cultural, intellectual, and theological forces colliding at the same time. I don't intend to survey that vast terrain, I only mean to look at an earlier point in Martin Luther's story to see why he was open and ready to step into the middle of that intersection and become a catalyst of change. Luther was studying to become a lawyer but through a life altering horseback ride through a lightning storm finds himself joining monastery¹. Even before he entered the monastery, Luther was troubled by the question of how he could stand in "holiness before a righteous and demanding God"². His life in the monastery did nothing to reduce his growing anxiety. He was tormented by his guilt. The theology of his tradition was that God gave grace to human beings through the sacraments of the church. The only condition for receiving this free grace of God is that one must confess one's sin before receiving the sacraments. This one condition plagued Martin Luther – how can you be sure you have fully confessed all your sin. He apparently drove his fellow monks crazy with the frequency with which he needed to make confession.³

As he shared this deep suffering with his confessor, he was encouraged to seek God in prayer and to find God in his study of scripture. On one particular night in a tower of the monastery as he was reading the book of Romans, he encountered God in a new way that led him to see that God meets us with grace not demand. From that encounter with God as he wrestled with his suffering, the seeds of reformation were sown.

The book of Job which we have been reading for several weeks reveals the very same experience. The prologue of the book of Job shows the catalyst for his suffering – the death of his children, the devastation of his wealth, the demise of his health. Job turns to his tradition to make sense of his loss and finds that it compounds his suffering. His friends gather round him certain that he must have sinned to bring such suffering upon himself. Job refuses to accept the easy logic of his tradition. And he looks for some sign of hope. But the longer he wrestles with his friends who will not release their certainty and will not enter with Job into his despair and into his inquiry with God, the deeper and deeper Job's despair becomes. As Job stays present to his suffering, he becomes convinced that there is something broken in the theology he has inherited. In the same way, Luther, as he remained present to his suffering, became convinced that

¹ John Dillenberger, *Martin Luther*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), xiv.

² *Ibid*, xv.

³ *Ibid*, xvi.

something was broken in the practices and beliefs of the church he inherited. It is only as Job encounters God in the whirlwind, or as Luther encountered God in a tower of his monastery, that either of them finds relief from their suffering. And as they lived into the hope that they found, a whole new way of seeing and believing and living was made possible.

If we want to be people who are a living reformation – if we want to be a living hope in the world – then we must be open to see and hear suffering. Both our own suffering and the suffering of others. As we face that suffering we may just find ourselves stumbling over parts of our tradition that are broken or places in our society that need to be changed and we may just need to resist the certainty of those who think they have it all figured out.

Gordon in his sermon last Sunday showed us what it looks like to encounter God through our reading of scripture in a way that challenges the story we have inherited. In his case the story about the atonement – about why Christ died and how his death restores our relationship with God. By the way, did you notice that the story Gordon told us was about the way that God meets us in suffering? That's what Jesus does on the cross. He enters fully into the suffering of the world and he shows us that suffering is not the final word. This is our life's work as people of God – seeking to find God or perhaps more accurately of letting God find us – in the places where we live: in the joy and blessing of life and, and in the suffering of life.

The release from suffering for Job comes not as God explains why that suffering occurred. Explanation was what he friends were up to. No, release from suffering began as God met him. Simply being addressed, being seen by God and accompanied by God was the beginning of his healing. And as God spoke, Job was invited into a whole new arena of discovery. He was directed to a much larger view to consider the awe inspiring breadth and power of creation and to consider the mystery of life.

The good news of this text is that God meets us in the middle of confusion and suffering. The challenging news is that we cannot know before we are smack dab in the middle of it where we will find God or where that discovery will lead. To be part of a living reformation – to be bearers of a living hope – means being open and attentive and expectant but not always certain. As Job shifted his focus from the logic of his suffering to a new logic that God was revealing he began to find his way back into life.

The narrator of Job describes his restoration as coming directly from the hand of God but it is interesting to note how that restoration unfolds. It includes being restored to his wrong-headed friends. It includes receiving the comfort and support of the community who finally come round him not with advice or explanation but with presence and fellowship. It includes the restoration of his fortune which apparently begins with the gifts of their generosity – a generosity Job extends not only to his sons as was the custom but to his daughters.

In the end the question of suffering isn't about where it comes from but where it can go – what can happen when we look for God or let God find us. What it means to bless God and be blessed by God in every circumstance of life. What new discoveries can come to us when we find God in unexpected places?

Today we celebrate the Reformation not just what happened in 1517 but what God has been doing from the beginning of time and continues to do as we live our lives with eyes wide open – attentive, expectant and willing to serve wherever we find God leading.

Please join me in the prayer for blessing in your bulletin as we commit ourselves to become a living reformation:

With our lips and with our hearts:
we will bless you, O God, in every moment of our lives.
With our ears and with our hearts:
**we will hear the cries of our sisters and brothers,
in every painful moment, in every broken place.**
With every gift and with our hearts:
**we will serve you, O God, and all of your children,
with every moment of our lives. Amen.**