

Texts: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

“Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.”

Do you know who said these words? Yes, it was Martin Luther. At least we like to claim that he said them, because no one knows for certain. They didn’t have cell phones or tape recorders back then that could record every single word. But it makes for a good dramatic moment. Luther, standing before the Holy Roman Emperor and the representative of the Pope, asked to recant, to take back what he had said and written, and refusing to do so. “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.” Some people claim that that moment was the beginning of it all, the moment that the Protestant church was born.

Luther was not trying to start a new church. He wanted to correct what he believed to be misunderstandings about the nature of sin and forgiveness, about what humans had to do to get right with God. That goes back way before the Reformation. We Lutherans claim that the beginning of it all goes back – well, all the way back to the beginning, to Genesis. To the story of creation, when God spoke and worlds came into being. When God took up some mud and sculpted a person and blew breath into that human creature. When God made male and female and gave them to each other to live in relationship, in community.

And then God gave these human beings dominion, that is, responsibility to care for the garden and God gave them boundaries – you can eat from every tree but that one.

And then there was a snake, with smooth moves and a way of talking – Did God really say that you couldn’t eat from *that* tree? You won’t die, you’ll be like God. And isn’t that what we’ve really wanted to be all along – to be like God? So they ate. And then

they realized what being like God was like – and then there were fig leaves, and God’s anger, and then there was separation, exile, banishment.

And ever since then, we humans have kept on trying to be like God. That’s what we call sin. It’s more than breaking the rules. It is that conviction that we can achieve whatever goal we set for ourselves, all by ourselves. It is the belief we can live rightly by our own effort. It is our determination to make ourselves the center of our own universe and to place God at the edge. If that is how you live, then the Gospel doesn’t mean very much to you.

As I read through the Gospel passage for this morning, I found myself coming back again and again to what the Jewish leaders said to Jesus: We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. It is completely ironic that they would say this to Jesus because they are having this conversation during the Festival of Booths, one of the three main festivals of the Jewish year. It is as if they didn’t remember that their identity as Jews was about the Exodus – from what? From slavery in Egypt.

We have never been slaves to anyone. That sentiment continues to this very day. Think of all the little sayings about achievement that we hear: Pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. Rags to riches. A chicken in every pot. Work hard, live right, you’ll get your reward. The one that dies with the most toys wins. Really? Never been slaves to anyone? We don’t even perceive our own enslavement. Slaves to fashion. Slaves to our work. Slaves to status and keeping up with the Joneses and to what other people think of us.

And the other phrase that jumped out at me were God’s words from the Old Testament reading, from Jeremiah: I will, over and over. I will make a new covenant. I

will put my law within my people. I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God. I will forgive their sins. I will, I will – these are the words of God’s promise.

The reason that we read these three Scripture passages on Reformation Day is that they all describe God’s activity toward us. They all describe God’s promise to us: forgiveness, grace, freedom.

Forgiveness. Grace. Freedom. Big Lutheran words that together mean that this God has reached into this broken world to reach you. In Jesus Christ, God came into this world to forgive all your sins, the ones that you speak aloud with others when we make our confession together, and the ones that you can’t say out loud, the dark and private ones. God has justified you – fully, truly reconciled you, welcomed you, brought you back home. God has freed you from the slavery of achievement, the slavery of competition, the slavery of comparison, the slavery of needing to be perfect.

There are many Christians who talk about forgiveness and freedom and having a relationship with God. All you have to do is to repent of your sin and accept Jesus as your personal Lord and savior. But did you hear those words “have to?” That is still the language of achievement and competition. I “have to” take the first step. God will uphold God’s end once I make the first move.

But the language of grace is this: God acts first. God has accepted you, sinner that you are, on the day of your baptism. Christ died for your sins before you were even born. God is not far away in heaven somewhere above the clouds but right here, right now, really and truly present in this room. Where two or three are gathered, there Jesus Christ is there also. The Holy Spirit lives in your hearts. The kingdom of heaven is very near,

always breaking through wherever someone is blessing another person, helping another person, praying for another person.

There is no more “have to.” But when we live in this gift of grace freely, there is “want to.” How can we keep this light under a bushel basket? How can we not go outside and tell everyone we meet: God is blessing you in so many ways. God’s grace is pouring out over you. God has freed you from the obligation God has freed you for a mission that lies beyond these walls. God has welcomed you into God’s own family as a child, no longer a slave.

You don’t *have* to do anything. But now you *get* to. Here is how Martin Luther defined faith: “A living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that you would stake your life on it a thousand times.” And when you live in that faith, he says, you are “ready and glad, without compulsion, to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, in love and praise to God, who has shown you this grace...” Do you hear those words? Living. Daring. Sure. Certain. If anyone ever asks you if you were ‘saved’, and when it happened, you can say “I was saved on the day of my baptism, when God claimed me as God’s own beloved child.”

This morning you have two things to take home with you. The first is this year’s stewardship packet, which contains a pledge intention for your monetary gifts and a pledge intention for your gifts of your time and talents. And the second is this little booklet published by our national church. Take a moment to reflect with me on the title: Stories of Faith in Action. Faith in Action. Because the two – faith and action – can’t really be separated.

Now that you don't have to do anything, what are YOU going to do? Here are stories of congregations and individuals who have answered that question in the places where they live and serve. We are connected to every single story here because we give a portion of our congregational budget to the wider church. We are connected to every single story in this booklet through the Holy Spirit. It is in that living, daring confidence in God's grace that you give a portion of what God has given to you to Immanuel Lutheran Church. And then this congregation gives a portion of those offerings to the Nebraska Synod. And then the Synod gives a portion of those offerings to the ELCA. And then we celebrate how God is at work in every corner of the earth, through the ministries that we support together.

I love Reformation Day because it is good to be reminded of where we came from. I love Reformation Day because it challenges us to look for the all places that need to hear this good news. Here we stand, freed from our slavery to sin, free to be the body of Christ for the world. God's work is never done. When we feed our hungry neighbors; when we care for each other with our prayers and our phone calls; when we commit our gifts of money and time to this congregation and the synod; when we welcome someone new into Christ's body through baptism. When we take a breath and count to 10 instead of jumping into an argument, it is God's work that we do.

Here we stand in this living, daring confidence. Here we stand in forgiveness, grace and freedom. You don't have to do anything. Now what are you going to do?