

"We Shall Not Fear"
Psalm 46

October 27, 2019

Reformation Day (Observed)

Read text

Once again, it's time for our annual celebration of Reformation Day. We like this day in the Lutheran Church. But what is the celebration all about? Some people think it's nothing more than one giant Lutheran pep rally at which we praise Martin Luther and celebrate the fact that we are Lutherans. Others think that Reformation Day is all about political or academic freedom. But I would submit to you today that Reformation Day is all about fear.

Fear? Yes, fear. There was a lot of fear going on during the time of the Reformation. It was a part of daily life. Fear is the reason that Martin Luther became a monk. Perhaps you remember the story of Luther traveling home during a violent thunderstorm in which he was nearly struck by lightning several times. So, he prayed to Saint Anne (the patron saint of miners, the profession of his father) and vowed that, if she saved his life from this weather, he would become a monk.

The fear present in the world of Martin Luther went beyond individual incidents like that. People lived in a state of fear and afraid of many things: disease, pestilence, war, death, and so on. People believed that the devil himself was personally responsible for each of these problems and they thought they saw Satan behind every tree. People feared the approaching end of the world and their almost certain journey to hell (purgatory if they weren't too bad).

Fear is also the reason that Luther suffered as a monk. Luther was scared to death of God. He even admitted that he hated God because of his massive sin and guilt from which he saw no deliverance. Luther was not unusual. Many people were of the opinion that God brought us into this world, toyed with us for a short number of years by establishing and enforcing laws that we were unable to keep, and then took great delight in casting us into hell. Paintings of that era reflected this idea. They always showed Christ as an angry judge who only came to condemn and punish. The art of that time showed the angels of God seizing poor sinful humans and gleefully throwing them in the arms of horrific demons to be brought down to the pit of hell.

Fear dominated that era. Why? That was Satan's strategy. Satan's strategy was simple and effective. He convinced people to be afraid of him, to be afraid of God, and to be afraid of the future. And it worked.

But what about today? Many believe that we are too sophisticated to feel such fear. Satan's strategy from the sixteenth century would thus not be very effective in the twenty-first century. So Satan has changed his strategy. Instead of trying to convince us to fear him, God, and the future, he took the exact opposite plan. He now attempts to convince us not to be afraid of him – to even doubt his existence. He would teach us not to fear God – at least, the God of the Bible with all of that sin, guilt, and judgment stuff. Finally, Satan would teach us not to fear the future and that everything would work out just fine.

And do you know what? I think Satan strategy is working again. We are not superstitious as they were in Luther's time. We don't see a devil behind every tree trying to hurt us. Weather and other natural phenomenon such as storms, tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, and so on may not frighten us as much since we can track them and predict them. Modern technology allows us to not be afraid of many of the things people used to be afraid of. We have weapons, computers, security systems, which are all designed to keep us safe.

As far as fear in one's spiritual life goes, how many people do you know that are scared of God and worried about going to hell? A lot of people don't even believe hell exists these days. Their view of God is what some have called Moral Therapeutic Deism. In this system, God is one who is there when we need him but otherwise leaves us alone. His job is to make us happy without making any real demands upon us other than to be nice people. There is no talk about sin (at least biblical sin) and no fear of punishment. Many people believe God loves them just the way they are and would never send anyone to hell. Heaven (or some very vaguely defined "better place") is the destination for all people.

However, there is still good reason to fear. Almighty God, Creator and Owner of all that exists, the God of the Bible, is serious about sin against His Law. He demands and requires not only that we be good, but that we be perfect in thought, word, and deed. His Law requires that we never do anything evil ever. It also requires that we always do all the good all the time. There will come a Day of Judgment in which those who have failed to be perfect will indeed be cast into hell, a place God never intended for humans but for the devil and all of his angels.

As far as this world and everything in it goes, it will all be destroyed on that Day of Judgment. The Word of God clearly declares, "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed." (2 Peter 3:10)

Although we might feel that Luther and the people of his time went overboard on the amount of fear which they had, there is still good reason to fear. There is reason to fear our spiritual condition and to fear our physical condition. Martin Luther felt that fear even years after the Reformation had begun. However, he took great comfort in our text for today, the Psalm chosen for the day and which served as the inspiration for the hymn of the day we have just sung, Psalm 46.

There's a lot of talk about "safe places" or "safe zones" in our society today. These are places where people can go, mainly on college campuses, in order to feel safe when confronted by fear. Although some may think fear in these cases is unwarranted (it amounts to having hurt feelings and being afraid of differing opinions), the need for a place of safety when confronted by fear of real danger is a real need.

God has provided such a place. In response to all of our fear, the psalmist writes, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." God is our refuge, our fortress, our place of safety. That which causes us fear spiritually is our sin, God's anger against sin, and God's righteous punishment of sin in hell. God's Son, Jesus Christ came into this world to take care of that sin by living the perfect life which God

demanded of us and by enduring the punishment we deserved for our sin. By His sacrifice upon the cross for all sin of all time, He has opened the way to our refuge, our Castle, in which we are safe from guilt, safe from punishment, and safe from judgment and safe from hell. Until the Last Day when Jesus comes to judge and punish sin and the world is destroyed, we rest safe and secure in Him.

God is also our strength as well. He is the One who keeps us safe while we wait for that day. He is the one who conquers all of our enemies. By Jesus' death on the cross, He has conquered sin. There is no guilt or fear about the sins we have done or the good that we have left undone. All has been forgiven through Jesus Christ.

By Jesus' glorious resurrection from the dead, He has conquered death. There is no need to mourn those who die in faith or to fear death for ourselves. There is only life, a life begun within you in your Baptism and which stays with you through the grave to everlasting life in heaven.

By Jesus' death and resurrection, He has conquered Satan himself. Satan is a lion, but a toothless lion. He tries to scare us but he cannot harm us and, therefore, there is no need for fear. Evil cannot harm us and there will be a day when there will be no more evil at all. As Martin Luther said in the hymn based on our text,

Though devils all the world should fill, All eager to devour us
We tremble not, we fear no ill; They shall not overpower us.

This world's prince may still Scowl fierce as he will, He can harm us none.

Don't be mistaken. There still will exist trouble, suffering, and even persecution for those who remain faithful. However, the psalmist encourages us to remember that God is "a very present help in trouble." He is not a God who says, "See you at Judgment Day" and then takes off, leaving us to struggle with the trouble, suffering, and persecution of this life. He is near us as we gather here for Divine Service. He is near enough to hear as He uses the voice of the pastor to declare our forgiveness and to speak encouragement to us from His Word. He is near enough to taste and touch as He places the very body and blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, in our mouths that we might be united with Him through faith and with one another in love.

While we can never live a trouble-free Christianity, we can live a fearless Christianity. All that we need for that is found in His Word. As we heard Jesus speak in the Gospel, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." As we are free from sin, death, and hell, so are we free from the fear of those things, as well.

All of this is a free gift given to us, which we receive, not by being good people, but through faith in the promises of God through Jesus Christ. Paul makes this abundantly clear in our epistle reading for today where he wrote, "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.... For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law."

Therefore, even when the world is falling apart around us – "though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling," we shall not fear.

Because God is with us here in this place – something the text calls “the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High”- we shall not be moved or shaken. Therefore, we shall not fear.

Even though the world order opposes God and fights against Him – “the nations rage, the kingdoms totter” – “He utters his voice, the earth melts.” Therefore, we shall not fear.

The Word of God found in our text promises, “He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire.” God will destroy all evil. He will be exalted among the nations. He will be exalted in the earth. Therefore, we shall not fear.

While fear may have been responsible for starting the Reformation, it is faith, joy, peace, and hope that were the results of the Reformation. Therefore, we do not celebrate Luther, Lutheranism, or the winning of a doctrinal war. We rejoice and give thanks to God for having righted the ship of His Church through the work of Martin Luther and others by restoring the Good News of salvation by grace through faith as a gift from God Himself. Therefore, we shall not fear – ever! Amen.