

God Shares His Love
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The holy Gospel for this Reformation Sunday comes to us from the Gospel of John, the eighth chapter:

To the Jews who had believed in Him, Jesus said, "If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth. Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but if a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed."

The gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we give You thanks for this celebration day of worship. We thank you for the legacy that has brought us to this place and that has blessed Your church. We pray that this day you would renew in us an understanding of the gospel, that You would fill our lives with the courage and hope that comes through Jesus Christ who is our savior and lord, and in whose name we pray. Amen.

Reformation Sunday, a time when we celebrate the Protestant Reformation and the formation of the church we now know of as Lutheran. Today is a good day and we hear afresh the gospel that comes to us through God's holy word in both Old and New Testament. We started our service today singing the hymn, A Mighty Fortress. I want us to hear today afresh how God shares His love with His creation, how God shares His love with us. A Mighty Fortress is a wonderful hymn that reminds us that God is the source of our protection. He is the source of our hope and assurance for the future. It is a hymn Martin Luther wrote based primarily in Psalm 46 and that too is a reading we have for today.

Before I begin getting into the psalm, I want to talk about this word *Selah*. Often when we're reading the psalms and when our readers are reading the psalms in worship, if the word *Selah* shows up, we skip right over it. We act as if it isn't even there. There's a good reason for that. You see the meaning of the word has been lost. We no longer know with confidence what that word means. We have some ideas, but we don't know. Is it, for instance, a breath mark for musicians, to know you got to breathe here? Or is it instead a place where there's an instrumental interlude, between the verses of the choir? Or is it a place where there's a crescendo in the music, an uprising in the music, to celebrate the goodness of what is proclaimed there?

Martin Luther says this. "*Selah* is telling us to pause and reflect diligently on the words of the psalm; for they require a calm and tranquil soul who is able to grasp with understanding what the Holy Spirit is presenting to his thought."

I love the idea of pausing for a moment, taking a moment to reflect more deeply on what has just been said, to be sure that we don't go rushing by it. *Selah* is a pause, a breath. Holy Spirit, come into me and reveal to me the depths of the truth that are here in Your Word. It's always a good prayer when we're looking at the Bible, to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal Himself, to reveal the Father to us, and the Son to us in these words of holy writ. So I want us to go through this psalm and pause where the *Selah* occurs and reflect back a bit.

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though the waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with surging. *Selah*

Stop there a moment. God is our refuge and strength, even though everything around us is in an uproar, everything falling apart, everything raging against our lives in the normalcy we expect from life. God is our refuge and strength, and so what? So we will not fear. It's good for us today, in these days, to be reminded that we have both the protection and the strength of God, working on our behalf in these frightening uncertain days. It's not by our own strength, but it's by our faith in the One who watches over us, who protects us that we don't have to react to the circumstances of our life today with fear. We, instead, can have confidence in God who is at work for us and in us. and through us. Take that truth in. Perhaps *Selah* can be "Amen, I claim the truth that the Word declares."

So Psalm 46 goes on:

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.
God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.
Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
He lifts His voice, the earth melts.

The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Selah. Let's pause for a moment.

Fortified cities were often defeated by their enemies because they would find a way to cut off their water source. Once they cut off their water source, all they had to do was wait, and eventually, the people in that city would have to come out. There is a river. There is a provision. There is life-giving water that God provides to his people, to his church, in which He dwells. In truth, that life-giving water is Jesus Himself. He is our living water. His presence means we have all that we need. Amen. Breathe it in. Believe it

And then the psalm ends with these words:

Come and see the works of the Lord,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars to cease
to the end of the earth.
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
He burns the shields with fire.
He says, "Be still and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."

The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Selah. Breathe it in. Believe it. Live out its truth. And how does this section begin? "Come and see" that we, God's people, who are benefiting from God's promise, protection, and strength, we bear witness to the world. We say to the world come and see. And when you come and see, you will discover this assurance is not only ours, but can be yours is our witness to an uncertain world, a fearful world, a world that is missing the assurance of God's indwelling presence. And so we bear witness. Come and see. Come and experience for yourself the goodness and the wonder of God's almighty presence abiding in your life. It is a wonderful witness we have for the world and it's rooted in the assurance in which we ourselves live, by the Holy Spirit, by the redemption that is ours in Jesus, by knowing the Father who is revealed to us in His Word.

But of course, it would never be Reformation Sunday without the words of Paul. And Paul espouses the words that are heart and soul of the Reformation from the scripture. And we see today in Romans Chapter 3 some wonderful teachings of doctrine that reinforce all of the things we've already been talking about. We look at Romans 3 verse 20. It says "no one will be justified in His sight by the works of the Law because the knowledge of sin comes through the Law." The Law doesn't give us a pathway to God. The Law reminds us that we're sinners. That means that the Law reminds us that we are now and always will be dependent on Jesus, dependent on God's love and grace demonstrated, brought, and provided to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

When Luther was explaining the meaning of baptism in the Small Catechism, he answers the question what does baptism mean for daily living with these words. It means that our sinful self with all its evil deeds and desire should be drowned through daily repentance, daily repentance, daily acknowledgment of our brokenness, our sin, our failure to follow God's instruction, to do what God asks us to do. We've all fallen short. We've all sinned. Sometimes when people are reading Luther's Small Catechism, they stop at that encouragement to daily acknowledge our sin, daily acknowledge our dependence upon God. But the words go on and day after day, a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever.

I used to misunderstand that. Day after day, we're supposed to rise and live with God in heaven? No, no. God is with us. That means day after day, I wake up knowing that God is with me. That everywhere I go, God goes. That every encounter I come against, God is with me. That I can trust in his presence, in his power. I can trust in His love both for me and for everyone I encounter. It's a powerful word that this invitation, not condemnation, this invitation to repent is an invitation to experience afresh every day the goodness, the love, the grace of God and that He, indeed, is ready to walk with us, to guide us through all that comes in our daily lives. It's a powerful promise.

The text goes on, "But now a righteousness from God apart from the Law has been made known to which the Law and the prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." It isn't about ignoring the Law. It isn't about ignoring, another word for the Law, the instructions of the Old Testament. It's about recognizing that they, the Law and the prophets of the Old Testament, point us to Jesus, show us God's intention to redeem His creation, to redeem you and me. Too often, we simply read the Old Testament as a set of books that tell us what not to do, or tell us what to do that we failed to do. But in fact, the Old and New Testament together reveal to us the character of the God we serve. It reveals that His mercies are new every day, that his steadfast love endures forever, and that they belong to you and to me.

But we are reminded, even here in Romans, after we've been told that redemption is revealed in Jesus. We're then told also that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. That we're then justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. You see, we can't claim God. We can't act as if we have a right to what is offered to us in Jesus. If we get what we deserve, we deserve condemnation. All of us for we've all sinned and fallen short. Not non-Christians more than Christians, but all of us, left to our own worthiness fall short. It's imperative that we remember that in an awareness of our sins, we also are given an awareness of God's mercy, God's offer of forgiveness, through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We're saved by grace. Believe it. It's true. Claim it. Know it. Because we're saved by grace through faith, we put our trust in what God has accomplished for us and that gives us the courage to be mindful, hopeful, and active in what God can accomplish through us.

Justification by faith is a hallmark of Lutheran theology. We are justified by grace through faith. And what does it mean? This justification by faith. Well, it means that it comes through grace alone. We're made right with God only by grace. It happens through Christ alone. The Solas of the Reformation reminds us it's by Christ alone that we receive redemption and grace for our lives. And it is offered to our world in Christ alone and the means of that justification is faith, our belief that that promise is true. We simply agree with the witness that is given to us in the promise of God. And we marvel that it is a promise for us through the cross, Jesus' life and death. Through that, God redeems us. He brings us back into relationship with Him. He restores the value that he created in us in the beginning and He puts us back into His family. He sets aside the wrath that is due us for our sin. We're told that Jesus took it all upon Himself on the cross, on our behalf.

It reminds us when we see others doing inappropriate things, others doing evil things, others not following God's way and following their own selfish way and maybe, hurting people in the process, that Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it. Jesus comes wanting to forgive and restore. Simply acknowledging our wrong and trusting in Jesus for His right means that we get what He deserves, while he takes what we deserve. God has demonstrated His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. So while we encounter others in their brokenness, we bring this word of hope that long before you're ready for God, He's ready for you and calls you to Himself. He shares His love with the world by giving His Son for us. He shares His love with the world by bringing the truth of Jesus through His children, through you and me to a world that may not yet know it. And so we bring the good word of the Gospel.

But just to reinforce this notion. Let's also look to the gospel today. Jesus said to those Jews who believed in him. So let's not belittle the words there. These are believers in Jesus. These aren't pretend-believers. These aren't believers that have only part of the story. Jesus says to those who believe in Him if you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. There's a way to grow in faith. There's a way to be strengthened in our walk with Jesus and that way is to abide in His Word.

Luther risked his life for this. John Huss lost his life for this in Reformation times. Luther took the time to translate the Bible, the Old and New Testament, into the common language of the German people. Tyndale did the same thing for the English-speaking world because he believed that it was important for us to be able to read the Scripture for ourselves, to abide in His Word. To learn the character and the ways of God by looking at how God has interacted with His people, by hearing His instruction, by growing in our own faith through His instruction, and by learning over and over again the depth of His love for us. And you shall know the truth. And the Truth shall set you free.

Too often we deceive ourselves. Too often we're deceived by others. But God's word fills our life, day by day, with the truth we need in Jesus. The truth we need to set us free from the bondage of our own fears and concerns, to allow us to live in the truth of the Good News and love of God for us. I don't know if you ever struggle with self-doubt, but I certainly do. I don't know if when you look at yourself in the mirror in the morning, you kind of wonder what in the world was God thinking with me. But the good news is that you are created in the image of God and you are restored, redeemed to the image of God. And that good news can change the way we live our lives because of its assurance of salvation. It changed the way we encounter others because God is good.

Listen to how these Jews who believe in Jesus respond. "If you hold to My teachings, you are really My disciples, then you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.' 'We are Abraham's descendants and have not been slaves of anyone. How can you say we will be set free?'" The Jews, even though they believed in Jesus, still thought that their status as descendants of Abraham, as those who were descendants of the chosen one, that is the chosen people of Abraham, that that gave them credit, that gave them merit, that gave them standing. And that was a false notion.

If we think our standing before God has to do with our service in the church, the amount of money to put in the offering plate, the amount of time we spend in penance, we're misinformed, we're deceived, and we're in bondage to that deception. Jesus is wanting these Jews who believe in Him to experience the greater freedom of knowing the Truth and the Truth is it is by His merit that they are saved. It is by grace. It is by the love and goodness of God that they are saved. It has nothing to do with Abraham. It has nothing to do with their good works. It has everything to do with what God has done for them in Jesus Christ and the same is true for us.

There are a lot of people I know that since March have had their lives completely turned upside down. Many of the things that they were doing every day and felt so good about, they couldn't do anymore. It was taken away in an instant. A lot of us took a long time to try to find our feet underneath us again. Some of us still haven't, but here's the truth of the Gospel. None of that changes your standing before God. None of that changes how much God loves you. If anything, it reminds us that Jesus is what sets us free from our sin. Jesus demonstrates God's love for us while we're yet sinners or maybe we should say, while we were yet confined, while we're yet idle, while we can't go and do the things we've always gone and done, including even coming to church. "I tell you the truth." Jesus says, "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever." You are a child of God. In Christ, you've been adopted into the family of God. You have a place forever. So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed. *Selah*. Believe it. Embrace it. Say amen to it and stand and live in the joy of God's protection, and stand and live in the strength that He offers us even in the face of these unknown times because God is good and He loves you and Jesus has earned for us a place in the family of God. Thanks be to God! Amen.