

This Sunday's texts:

Psalm 46

Romans 3:19-28

John 8:31-36

This Is Most Certainly True

Pastor Jim Cords

October 30, 2022

The Holy Gospel for this Reformation Confirmation Sunday comes to us from the Gospel of John, the eighth chapter:

To the Jews who had believed 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 to anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, 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. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

The Gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we give You thanks this day that You are faithful, that You keep Your promises, and that we can be certain of who You are. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Now I know that this is going to be shocking to many of you and unsurprising to others and I waited to share this story until after your confirmation instruction was done. I had a reputation when I was in Junior High. I was a difficult confirmation student and I was the difficult confirmation student in the exact opposite way in which you were difficult confirmation students. I was difficult because I kept interrupting the pastor with questions. Some of those questions were worthy questions and others were just annoying. I'll be honest with you. My father left our family when I was in fifth grade and when I got to confirmation, I was trying to convince myself and the world that no one could love me. So I tested my youth directors and my pastors. By the way, they passed with flying colors.

I remember studying the Small Catechism and coming across these words, "This is most certainly true" and thinking to myself and saying to my pastor, "That's kind of arrogant, isn't it?" Yes, I know. Even as a junior higher, I use that word. That's kind of arrogance, isn't it? This idea that someone could claim the certainty of truth was something that took a while to work its way into my faith and my understanding. How grateful I am that it became clear to me that the reason it could be so certain was that it relied, not on me, not on what I thought, not what I believed, but on the very promises of almighty God which were and are trustworthy.

Today, we're going to focus our attention on Psalm 46. Psalm 46 is the inspiration for Martin Luther's famous hymn for Reformation Sunday "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." It's an important idea to understand and confirm this is especially important for you, as you continue this journey through life, to recognize that in difficult times God is a fortress. That is, God is the place where you can find protection and peace.

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."¹ So often in the immaturity of our faith, we expect that what God will do because He loves us is make our lives easy and without difficulty. Any level of experience at all, including the experience that you confirmands have had in your short lives, I know it feels like you're older now, but believe me, it's been a short life for you so far, but I bet even you can look back and know hard times, and know struggles, and know pain, and maybe even know some hopelessness and disillusionment in moments. Life can and is and probably will be hard, painful. Yet we're told God is the place we can go for refuge. God is the one, when we're out of strength and out of hope, who can give us strength. That's the clarity of this psalm, this hymn of the church in the Old Testament to remember that God is the place we can turn in trouble.

This is most certainly true. He's available. He's here. He's present. The promise of God, the promise of Jesus, is to be with us in the form of the Holy Spirit, to live in us, and be with us in all times, good and bad. Even when we doubt, the Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress.

In those dark days after my dad left, I remember the despair that I felt. I remember the struggle that was a part of my young life at the time. There have been many other times when life is difficult, when it *feels* like God is absent. It feels like I'm alone. It feels like I'm the only one. And in those moments and in those feelings, I cannot think my way out of it, but I can remember that God is almighty. I can remember that He is our protector, our fortress, as I cling to His promises that outweigh the darkness of my feelings.

We're reminded in this psalm. "Come and see what God has done."² It's a refrain that exists throughout the Scripture. It's a refrain that is especially heard throughout the Old Testament. This idea of, when we're in this dark place, in this hard place, to remember what God has done, so that we can remember what God can and will do in our lives. We look back to see that He has been faithful and it gives us the hope and the assurance that in our life, in these dark moments, He

¹ Psalm 46:1

² Psalm 46:8

will continue to be faithful. Your hope for the future can be assured in the knowledge that God knows the future He holds for you. It is encouraging.

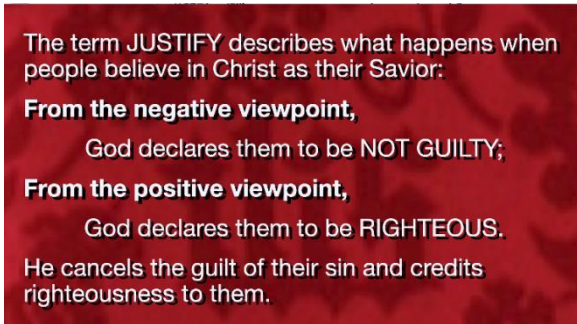
Now there's another thing that's really clear. At Joe's ordination last week, I had a theological-type person come up to me and ask me the question. Why do we say in the confession we are in bondage to sin, when we also say that we have been forgiven and are free in Christ? That doesn't make any sense. To which I said "*Simul Justus et Peccator.*" That's Latin. It is one of those phrases that comes out of the Reformation. It's actually one of the key ideas in the Reformation, that at the same time, we are both saints and sinners. We live in the paradox of being sinners who are declared righteous. Hear this again. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus for all who believe. Now I could try to stand up here and convince each one of you confirmands that you're sinners, but honestly, it wouldn't be hard because you already know it. You already know the shortcomings and brokenness that are in your life. You already know when you act in ways you shouldn't and when you failed to do things you shouldn't. All of us are aware of our brokenness. We're reminded that the righteousness of God, the declaration of our forgiveness, the faithfulness of God's love does not depend on us not being sinners. But in the midst of that reality, we are given the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus. That's the promise of the Reformation.

You may remember, if you ever saw the movie of Martin Luther, that when his life started or when his journey started as a man of God, it started in the midst of a storm, a very violent lightning storm, where he thought he was about to die. He bargains with God. He says, "God, if you will just save my life [as lightning is striking the trees around him] I'll become a monk. I'll serve you for the rest of my life." God spares his life and he does become a monk, but he lived in the fear of God's wrath. As he continued to journey deep into the Scripture, as he began to see the truths of the promises of God, especially in the writing of Paul in Romans, he began to realize that God is a God of love. Now, he knew from Romans 3:23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. He knew that he fell short. He was very aware of that. Matter of fact, he wore out his confessor, that is, the person he went to confess his sins while he was in the monastery. He had worn him out with all the sins he would confess, thinking he had to remember every single one, until he realized that we "are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that [is ours] in Christ Jesus."³ Yes, you're a sinner and yes, you're

³ Romans 3:24 ESV

forgiven and yes, you are declared right with God because of his love and because of the death of Jesus on the cross.

This justification by faith is again a hallmark phrase of our Lutheran theology. It takes on an interesting meaning. I grabbed this slide from last year's



The term JUSTIFY describes what happens when people believe in Christ as their Savior:
From the negative viewpoint,
God declares them to be NOT GUILTY;
From the positive viewpoint,
God declares them to be RIGHTEOUS.
He cancels the guilt of their sin and credits righteousness to them.

sermon. The term justified describes what happens when people believe in Christ as their Savior. From the negative viewpoint, God declares them not guilty; taking away their sin. From the positive viewpoint, God declares us to be righteous. He cancels the guilt of our sins and credits us with His righteousness. Now last year when I did

this, the whole congregation, having been very well-steeped in Lutheranism, was very happy with the idea that we are forgiven through the blood of Jesus. Can I get an amen? But when I asked them for that same amen when I said you are righteous, they hesitated a little bit. It was like “Whoa, whoa, don't take it too far!”

We need to grasp the paradox. You need to understand this truth. Yes, you are a sinner as am I, and yes, you are declared righteous before God because of Jesus. So you can say “Yes, I'm a sinner. Yes, I'm justified.” and you can even say, “Yes, I am righteous because of Jesus.” Amen? [Murmurs of amen in pews]. Again, not quite as strong, but we're building it up. We're trying to get there and I'm trying to encourage you confirmants to realize the truth of Romans that tells us that the blood of Jesus atones for our sins. You don't have to wallow in guilt anymore. You can let it go because of this promised work of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Let's go back and just realize God's statement about you. You are forgiven. I want to ask you. In the back of your mind, do you believe that? Do you feel it or are your feelings conflicted by the knowledge of your sin? Do you accept, in heart and mind, the declaration of God - you are forgiven?

I want us to go back and remember that this is most certainly true, especially when we need it the most, when we have the most doubts, when we're experiencing the most darkness, when we're struggling the most. I want us to remember this promise that the Lord Almighty is with us, that God of Jacob is our refuge. Even emotionally and relationally, God is with us, in the struggles and in the darkness.

In this Psalm 46, if you look at it carefully and, by the way, confirmands, I encourage you to go back and look again at Psalm 46. Parents, remind your confirmands to go back and look again at Psalm 46 because one of the realities of the psalm is it not only reminds us that God is our refuge and reminds us that storms come. The storm referred to in the psalm is so great that the mountains are falling into the seas. It's utter chaos, including wars. Then it moves and it says "Be still, and know that I am God."⁴ When your life is most chaotic, when you are most uncertain about the circumstances swirling around you, and an uncertainty about what the future holds, remember to take a breath, and "be still and know" that the God who loves you is with you. The God who makes this promise to you will never abandon you. No matter what the chaos is He can give you peace during the storm, or you can sing a hallelujah in the midst of the storm. You will encounter some storms. But His promise is good.

In the beginning of Covid, I was, and still am serving on the ministry board for Lutheran congregations in Mission for Christ. We recognized that a lot of our pastors were struggling when the church was shut down, not only where we were, but literally all over the country and all over the world. Pastors who were used to being pastors and were told don't meet with your people, were really struggling. We came up with just this little phrase to encourage them. God's got this. Remember in the midst of your life in the coming days, confirmands, remember in the midst of finishing high school and trying to figure out what you're going to do next, remember in the midst of being broken up with your boyfriend or girlfriend, remember God's got this. His promise is true and this is most certainly true. Say that with me. This is most certainly true. God not only has the circumstances in which we live, but it's also important that we remember.

Even with Job, in the midst of the disaster that was Job's life, we read in our readings through this last week this certainty. "I know that my redeemer lives."⁵ That was Old Testament, folks. Job is considered one of the oldest books in the Old Testament. He had lost his entire family and all of his wealth and he still proclaimed "I know that my redeemer lives." God's got this and He's got you.

It's great to know good "[f]or God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son."⁶ But it's even better to know that God so loved the world that He loves you. He knows you. He knows everything about you and He loves you and He's got you. This is most certainly true. Amen? Thanks be to God.

⁴ Psalm 46:10

⁵ Job 19:25

⁶ John 3:16 Berean Literal Bible