

Commemoration of Martin Luther – Birth • November 13, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Hebrews 13:7-8 (Isaiah 46:1-11)

“Remembering Our Leaders”<sup>i</sup>

*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.* – Hebrews 13:7-8

Please join me in prayer: Holy Father, God of mercy, look with compassion upon this land and grant to us civil peace. We cherish the right to express disappointment or disagreement publicly, but grant grace to those who do so always to speak with respect and reason. Remove from all hearts hatred, suspicion, fear, and prejudice. Help us to explain our neighbor's actions in the kindest way and use Your Church to be an agent of peaceful and reasoned discourse in this time. Grant us unity as a nation, delighting in the rule of law and not of men. Drive far from us the spirit of sedition and rebellion and help all our citizens to honor our government officials, to pray for them, and to hold them accountable as servants of the common good. We ask this through Christ, who taught us to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's, and whose love embraces all and calls all to be Your children. Amen.<sup>ii</sup>

**We need good leaders.**

While it's apparent that people in the United States have many differing perspectives on what makes for a good leader, that need is real. As we've seen over the past many months, people around our nation became passionate advocates for their parties or their candidates, hoping to get good leaders into office. And as we've seen, that passion can turn into a divisive force, promoting “us versus them” attitudes, even driving friends and families apart. Passion turns to hate. Politics and partisanship become the concepts in which people put their trust and confidence, even making a religion out of candidates and party issues. The desire for a good leader becomes something else: idolatry.

Idolatry happens when you put anything in the place that God should hold in your life, looking to it as a foundation for your life and the object of your worship. Look back at today's reading from Isaiah 46, and you'll hear God's prophet calling out the idols of Babylon. Images of those false gods had to be carried by the people who made them. What kind of leaders are those that the people should put their trust in them? God reminds His people that *He* made *them*, and He will never fail to carry His people throughout life.

**We need good leaders, not idols. Good leaders point us to Jesus and his word.**

On November 10, 1483, the Church was struggling. The Bible was generally not read, and even where it was, it was not well understood. Law and Gospel were largely confused. People longed for rest, but were driven to their good works to make things right with an angry God. But their good works never seemed sufficient to achieve peace with God – because they weren't.

On November 10, 1483, Martin Luther was born. While his birth wasn't a noteworthy event even in the little town of Eisleben, Germany, in time this man would open the pages of the Bible and help the Church recapture its central teaching: that we are saved by grace through faith because of Christ.

**Remembering is good.** History and memory bring the Church together across the ages. The Gospels themselves are a narrative that recall the work of Jesus for us. Without knowing who Jesus is and what he has done, faith cannot exist. Just so, without a vivid memory of the past, the ties holding us together as the people of God are severed. The story of Jesus is told by human beings.

That's why today we commemorate God's work through His humble servant Martin Luther. We're not doing this for Luther's sake; he's not the point. We do this to remember how faithful God is in maintaining His Church and keeping the promise that was given to us by Christ Himself: “The gates of hell shall not prevail against [Christ's Church]” (Matthew 16:18).

Martin Luther was a simple person. In our time it might be hard for us to think of him like that, given that we know what an enormous role he would come to play in world history. But he was born into a family of modest means in completely unremarkable circumstances.

Luther's early years are full of stories of developing character and, at times, extraordinary events. You probably know the story of the thunderstorm that drove him into the monastery. “Help me, St. Ann, and I will become a monk,” he cried, fearing for his life.

But momentous, life-changing events such as this, as significant as they are, are not what really set Martin Luther apart. What set him apart was his deep love for the Gospel, which he discovered only later

in his life. After years of struggling to achieve a righteousness of his own, the Holy Spirit opened the Scriptures to him and showed him that the righteousness of God was not something that Luther merited, but was, in fact, something that Christ had won for him—and for us all—by grace. This was truly good news, great news, then and now. For the Reformation is still all about Jesus!

And Jesus is what we all still need. Historians tell us that Luther's world was steeped in ignorance and superstition. Most people had little or no knowledge of God's Word, because most of them could not read, and Bibles were expensive and scarce. While today we have easy access to God's Word, basic human nature hasn't changed. We are conceived and born in ignorance and superstition. We set up idols of our own making. We deny our sinfulness and our rebellion against God. But in that purposeful forgetting of our own past, we show that people today are spiritually really no different than at Luther's time.

When Martin Luther rediscovered the Gospel, he sought to reform the Church—not overthrow it. He was not seeking to start a new church. He wanted simply to reform the existing Church, to draw it back to the pure Gospel of God's grace in Christ. He invited church teachers and leaders to discuss these vital questions.

From tiny Wittenberg, off the beaten path in Germany, grew a movement that has not stopped, a confessing movement that seeks always to underscore these truths of God's Word: We are freed from all sins and guilt solely by the grace of God, which is in our Lord Jesus Christ. We receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation simply by believing this good news that Jesus has done it all for us. *Sola gratia! Sola fide! Sola Scriptura! Solus Christus! By grace alone! By faith alone! By Scripture alone! Because of Christ alone!*

Luther pointed only to the One of humble and miraculous birth, Jesus Christ, true God and true man. Luther preached nothing else but Christ, “who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man” (Nicene Creed).

**So today we look only to Christ as our confidence and hope.** Don't look to the world and its leaders; don't look at the strength or weakness with which you believe; don't look to the things you do; don't look to the good works you do for your neighbor; don't even look in your heart. Looking to ourselves only shows us that we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, that we earned God's displeasure, anger, and wrath. We will find no comfort there, no forgiveness there, only bondage in sin.

Look to Christ and Him alone. He is the same yesterday and today and forever. Christ truly is your comfort, hope, and joy. See that He has done all things well for you. He has earned God's favor. See how He has kept the Law in our place. See how He has earned heaven. See that Jesus alone, by His suffering and death on the cross, appeased God's anger and turned away His wrath. See that He does all this for you, in your place. By His work alone we are saved. Jesus, the Son of God, has set you free. And if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed! (cf. John 8:36).

While we didn't plan for it to happen this way, it's entirely fitting that this weekend we are dedicating a new perpetual plaque here at St. John's. The plaque, which adorns the wall right outside the entrance to this sanctuary, has been given in memory of Chuck Herbert. Chuck hoped that we would one day have a marker to record the names of all the pastors who have served our congregation. Pastors are ordinary human beings. We are certainly not worthy of being idolized. We are here to point you to Jesus and his word, and in so doing, strive to be good leaders.

That is why we remember the birth of Martin Luther today. God used this humble man from out-of-the-way Wittenberg to shine the light of the Gospel brightly into his day and, thankfully, into ours as well. It is good that we remember Martin Luther's birth. **It is even better that we remember and believe in the One to whom Luther always pointed: Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.**

**Amen.**

*A quote from Luther:*

“I beg not to have my name mentioned, and to call people, not Lutheran, but Christian. What is Luther? The doctrine is not mine, nor have I been crucified for any one. St. Paul would not suffer Christians to be called after Peter, but only after Christ. Why should I—miserable piece of corruption that I am—have this honor, that the children of Christ should be called after my abominable name? No, no, my dear friends; let us abolish party names, and be called Christians after Christ, whose doctrine we have.”<sup>iii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Credit due to Dr. Lawrence R. Rast Jr. for his sermon for this commemoration, from which much of this message is drawn

<sup>ii</sup> LCMS Facebook posting, *A Prayer for Our Nation*, 11 November 2016

<sup>iii</sup> “Why the Name Lutheran?” *Theological Monthly* 1, vol. 6 (June 1921): 174.