

Entrusted with the Message of the Gospel
Deuteronomy 34:1-12
I Thessalonians 2:1-8

“For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals but to please God who tests our hearts.”

Five hundred years ago on All Hallows' Eve, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg. John Calvin had turned eight just three months before that night and John Knox was either two or twelve, depending on your source, so the 500th anniversary of our part of the Reformation will be marked some twenty years hence, if at all. I say “if at all” because of an essay I read on the occasion of this anniversary that suggested a dignified end should be found for the heirs to European Protestantism—for us! After citing dismal statistics, the essay concludes that the key difference between Luther and his Mainline Protestant descendants today is this: Luther was convinced the end times were near, yet his legacy has endured for five centuries; today American Protestant denominations are taking extraordinary measures to ensure our dominance will live forever, but the end has already come.

Unless.

I want to spend a few minutes this morning reflecting on the enduring source of reformation given the community of faith by God and, I daresay, the source of reformation given societies that have been shaped by the biblical narrative for the last three thousand years. That source is not big screens projecting stanzas of catchy love songs about Jesus or praise bands or a groovy minister in jeans walking up and down the aisle talking about herself or even the latest technique for survival taught by seminary professors who have never served a congregation. That source is the ongoing engagement with and interpretation of God's address to God's people by those who have believed through the ages and by those who believe today that their lives depend upon what they are about to hear.

I think it is not by chance that on Reformation Sunday the lectionary has us leaping over what remains of the story in Exodus in order to land us in the book of Deuteronomy, the book that was the impetus for Israel's reformation in the seventh century B.C. When Josiah became king in 640 B.C., he inherited a religious tradition and a Temple in Jerusalem that was crumbling within and without. So Josiah decided to do that cosmetic thing you do when life-as-you-know-it appears to be unraveling: he embarked on a renovation project. Who knew in the midst of renovating the Temple that the high priest Hilkiah would find the long forgotten book of Deuteronomy stuck on a shelf in some dark corner of the Temple? Hilkiah then gives Deuteronomy to the king's secretary who, in turn, sits the king down and reads it aloud from beginning to end. Josiah is literally undone by what he hears. He tears his clothes and orders his cabinet to “inquire of the Lord for me, for the people and for all of Judah, concerning the [meaning] of this book that has been found.” So the men, I kid you not, seek out Huldah, the prophetess—a woman!—to interpret the meaning of the words.

Next Josiah gathers everyone in the Temple, reads the whole of Deuteronomy and makes a new covenant, promising to follow the Lord and to keep his commandments with all of his heart and all of his soul. Without exception, the people join the covenant. And so it happens that a reformation is begun by the book that reminds the people who they are, to whom they belong, and how they are to live as God's people in the world. Scholars believe Deuteronomy was an interpretation of God's law and promises written in the seventh century B.C. with an eye to the reformation of worship, festivals, justice, kingship, the priesthood, the prophets, criminal, family and civil law, and ethics. In brief, God's people were reformed by God's word rediscovered, reread and reinterpreted for such a time as theirs.

Likewise, in 70 A.D., following the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, two religious communities underwent a reformation in the face of what seemed to be certain death. Rabbinic Judaism turned to the words of Scripture as the place of encounter with God's presence now that God's dwelling place on earth lay in ruins. The nascent Christian movement encountered God's word in a crucified rabbi whom God raised from the dead and so began to live as though death had no power, no dominion over them. Even before the Temple had been destroyed, however, another rabbi had been struck blind by God's address on the road to Damascus and spent the rest of his life proclaiming the same gospel to a pagan world. His First Letter to the Thessalonians is the earliest writing we

have in the New Testament. Four times in the twelve verses before us this morning, Paul speaks of the gospel of God which has been entrusted to the apostles and soon to the early church. The gospel was simply the story, beginning with God's address of Abraham, reread by Paul through the lens of Christ's death and resurrection. Soon the known world would be reformed, "turned upside-down," by the living Word of God.

Fifteen hundred years later, cloistered in a monastery, Martin Luther was writing a summary of the psalms for his fellow monks when he "suddenly had to lay his pen aside." Luther had wrestled mightily with the meaning of God's righteousness and taken it to be an unbearable judgment upon his hopelessly sinful nature. Yet something was leading him to think he had misunderstood the words of Scripture and therefore misunderstood God. So he famously turned to the book he dreaded most, Paul's letter to the Romans, and encountered, for the first time, "not the punitive righteousness of God but rather the forgiving righteousness of God by which in [God's] mercy [God] makes us just." "Then it seemed to me as if I were born anew," he wrote. "The whole Bible suddenly took on a new aspect for me." Yet Luther did not go on to found a new religion. Neither did he think he had stumbled on "true" Christianity or been given a new revelation. Rather he rediscovered and revived what was essential. He had been given new insight to hear God's address in such a way that his hearing led to the reform of the church and even of Europe. Moreover he insisted that he was drawn into this affair "against his will 'because of his office'—that is, through the conscientious performance of the duties of his preaching office," through his being set apart like Paul and Huldah and Moses before him, to interpret God's address as one entrusted with the good news of love's triumph and death's defeat.

Fast forward to those of us entrusted with the message of the gospel today in what appears to be the waning years of most Protestant denominations. Presently I am taken with the words of John Leith, a crusty old Presbyterian minister turned professor of theology who wrote a few decades ago that "The renewal of the church will not come without the recovery of the authenticity and theological integrity [of the gospel], of the church's message...that is not moral advice or political rhetoric or personal therapy or entertainment but the means of God's grace to forgive and to sanctify, to heal and to fortify human hearts for the great crises and challenges of life."

You and I have been entrusted with the gospel, with a particular story of what God has done, is doing and will yet do to make and keep human life human. Wherever that story is rightly told and truly acted out, John Calvin said in so many words, there the church is. Problem is, the church no longer knows the story, and because the church no longer knows the story, neither does the society in which the church is trying to be the church. As Jonathan Sachs, the former chief rabbi of Britain observed, "The story Americans told themselves was a biblical story—an exodus story of various diverse peoples leaving oppression, crossing a wilderness and joining together to help create a promised land. The American social structure," Sacks continues, "was based on biblical categories...and the heart of society was in the covenantal realm: marriages, families, congregations, communities, charities, and voluntary associations. American's Judeo-Christian ethic celebrated neighborliness over pagan combativeness; humility as the basis of good character, not narcissism. It believed in taking in the stranger because we were all strangers once." Today, Sacks concludes, America has lost the story. Why? Because the communities of faith in America have lost the story.

But so had the people of Judah and the pagans in Paul's time who never had the story and the church in Luther's day. Could the source of our life and reformation today still be our engagement with God's address and our wrestling with the gospel's meaning in the face of the great challenges and crises of our times? Might we dwell in God's word anew to the end that we may again become "a cell of messengers and advocates in the world on behalf of the world's own future, ...the community that *interprets*...each reality in the world as an occasion of that hope which is there if Jesus lives; ...the community that treats in words and speaking deeds each hope and fear as a hope for love's triumph" [Robert Jenson] in the lives of our children and youth, the lives of the sick and the dying, the lives of the hungry and homeless, the lives of the forgotten and the lost, the lives of the alien and stranger?

Treating in the Memorial to the Lost on our front lawn, in Souls Shot, 26 Pebbles read, Mozart's Requiem sung, each hope and fear of our society, our nation, our world as a hope for love's triumph. This is the message of the gospel entrusted to us for such a time as this. Therefore I am knocking. I am seeking. I am asking you to promise anew on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation to be the church that is reformed and always being reformed by God's Word. Amen.