

First Sunday of End Time – Reformation
November 3, 2013
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

Jeremiah 31:31-34

"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."
(NIV)

"What is a Lutheran?" "Why are you a Lutheran?" Has anyone ever asked you these questions? How do you respond to your friend, coworker, or neighbor? Have you taken the time to consider what it means to be a Lutheran? Are we able to answer the question why we call ourselves Lutherans? There are actually plenty of good answers we could give for the reason we are Lutherans. Some of you have perhaps even studied the Reformation and could give others a good summary of how God used Luther. You might remember the key points of grace alone, and faith alone, and Scripture alone – truths that are still as dear to us as they were to Luther.

There could be many different answers, some perhaps better than others, of why people are Lutheran. I pray you have some good answers to why you call yourself a Lutheran. As we look at these words of Jeremiah I'm glad to be a Lutheran on this day we celebrate the Reformation. For as a Lutheran there is a beautiful truth that we keep hearing and teaching and preaching, a truth that we hold onto to and confess, a truth about which we sing, and a truth over which we will forever rejoice. This is the wonderful truth God once used a man named Martin Luther to put back into the spotlight! I love being a Lutheran for I know the truth - I am: **Forgiven and Free in Christ!**

The story of Martin Luther is a story about a boy studying to become a lawyer. At school Luther proves to be very intelligent, even the head of his class. He seemed to have it all going for him. He gained the respect of everyone and he graduated with a *Master of Arts* degree. But on the inside this young man is anything but happy. He is terrified for he fears a holy God. Although this young man faithfully listened to what parents told him, such as praying to the saints and doing good works, he is still very much troubled. Why? To answer with one short word - sin. He knows that God is angry with him because of sin. His conscience bothered him. He lived in constant fear that he would face a terrible punishment from God for his sins. So to find peace for his soul, he decides to stop pursuing his career as a lawyer and enters a monastery.

Yet, in this monastery, Luther still faces the same fears. He tries everything to please God. In this strictest of monastic orders, he chooses a rigorous path. He goes long periods without food or drink, spends nights without sleep, endures bone-chilling cold with neither a coat or blanket to warm himself, and even at times beats his own body. He does not simply go through the motions, but he earnestly prays, fasts and denies himself. He seeks to love God with

all his heart, strength, and his mind. But each time Luther went to confession he realized once again the evil in his heart. He knows that it will bring God's wrath down on him and he is terrified. He comes to hate the fact that by his own efforts he can never live up to God's standards of perfection. The church in his day kept telling people to try harder, to leave their ordinary way of life, and to love God more. But the more Luther tried the more he realized he failed. What a miserable way to live - in fear, in doubt, knowing that a just God will punish eternally and rightly so because of sin!

Thankfully, this was just the beginning of the story of Luther's life. He ended up leaving the monastery because he is offered a teaching position at the university. At this university he begins to study one book more than any other - the Bible. As he reads and studies the Bible his eyes are opened - to ***"a righteousness from God, apart from law,..to which the Law and the Prophets testify."*** He finds in God's Word ***"this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."*** Luther was able to see the truth he knew in his heart that ***"there is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*** But now he came to also know in his heart how all ***"are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."*** (Romans 3) In God's Word Luther began to see a God of mercy, a God of grace. Luther found true comfort and peace. Luther found his Savior Jesus. Or perhaps I should say the Savior Jesus found Luther. In the Bible, Martin discovered the greatest truth of all - he is forgiven and free in Christ! And as we say the rest is history. Martin Luther devoted his life to getting this Bible into the hands and hearts of others so they could see Jesus too, so they could be forgiven, so they too could be free.

The truth that we too are forgiven and free in Christ is right here in the words of Jeremiah. About 600 years before Christ was born Jeremiah is given this Word of God. ***"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah."*** This we are told will not be like the old covenant. The old one was a two-sided covenant. The Lord chose Israel as His people. The Lord blessed them and provided for them. Then the Lord asked them to obey Him. He gave them His laws. He said I will be your God and you will be my people as long as you walk in my ways. The people agreed. But you know how this ended up, don't you? Read Jeremiah and find out. The people failed to hold up their side of the bargain - you might say before the ink on the contract was even dry! They disobeyed God - at every command. They sinned and sinned and sinned. The old covenant proved they could do nothing to save themselves. They did not please God. They could not please God. Sound familiar? Luther was in the same boat. So are we. No amount of good works can atone for our sins. No matter how hard we might try to climb the ladder of goodness we will never reach God for we all have sinned and fall short.

This is why this is such good news when the Lord declares, ***"I will make a new covenant."*** Literally, the Hebrew says the Lord will cut a new covenant. I like those words because they bring to mind all the animal sacrifices, all the cutting, all the blood. This is a far better covenant. This is a one-sided covenant. God does all the work. We understand the work God did to make this new covenant with us. He sent His Son. This covenant was sealed with Jesus' blood. Jesus lived the life God demands of each of us. This is where we find the righteousness we need, the righteousness from God, apart from the law, which all the Bible tells us about. Jesus paid the price for our sin on the cross. He suffered for our sin and died the death that belonged to us. He rose again to seal the whole deal! We did nothing! God did everything! The Lord did it all so that He is now able to ***"forgive (our) wickedness and remember our sins no more."*** This is the beautiful gospel truth - we are forgiven in Christ.

We are also now free in Christ. Luther is a prime example of being freed from the law. He finally learned God's law was not a heavy burden on his back given by an angry God who was ready to toss a lightning bolt his way the first time he stepped out of line. Jesus kept the law for him. Now Luther could, like the psalmist, run in the paths of God's commands because God had set his heart free. We too are free from sin and free to live for God in Christ. The truth has set us free! God gives us the Holy Spirit to guide us. At our baptisms He makes us His children. In the Lord's Supper He works in our hearts to strengthen us. Do you see the beauty of this new covenant? ***"I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD.***

"What is a Lutheran?" "Why are you a Lutheran?" Because we have learned, like Luther, the most important truth of all! It is not about us and what we have done. If it was, how would you know when you have done enough? How could we ever remove the doubts that our efforts do anything to save us? No, it is not about us and what we have done! Thank God for that because on that path there is no real comfort, no real peace, and no real forgiveness. We are glad to be Lutherans because, as God did for Luther, He has opened our eyes to the only truth that sets us free. Jesus saved us. Jesus forgives us. Jesus has set us free. This is the new covenant – the new covenant which is found for us right here – in Scripture alone. In this Word of God we find those important Reformation truths that Luther found – that we are saved by grace alone, through faith in Jesus alone. Now like Luther, as Lutherans, we want to devote our lives to getting this Word into the lives and hearts of those around us that they too may experience the joy of being forgiven and free in Christ. I pray, as we do, we recognize the same thing Martin Luther did as he confessed: **"I Did Nothing, the Word Did Everything."** Amen.