

By some wrinkle in time I find myself in your midst today, and I am amazed to see you celebrating a Day of Reformation! It is incredible to find myself here in a church that calls itself Lutheran. You see, I was born in 1490 AD, and Martin Luther was my pastor.

I was born and grew up in the north-central part of Germany, in a town called Wittenburg. There weren't many more than 2,000 people living there at the time, though that would change. My family scratched out a living. My father worked for the local brewery, and most of what was brewed stayed in town. I wish I could tell you something romantic about life back then, but I can't. Existence was hard, short, and often brutal.

Death haunted Europe in our time. The Plague, which is just a history book story to you, was a real thing to us. 16,000 people died in the city of Strasbourg in one year's time. 300 villages in the region around this city were left deserted. More babies died than survived after childbirth. Beggars and panhandlers were everywhere, not to mention thieves. We German peasants were far from being peaceful workers of the land. We tended to solve a lot of things with fists, knives, and clubs. It's a wonder I lived as long as I did.

Even so, the Church was an ever-present part of life. On our town square sat the city church and the Castle Church was a few blocks away. An Augustinian monastery and a small university were there, too. I was baptized the same day I was born, because my survival was not guaranteed. I made it, though, and grew up like so many others in our little town, aware of the great importance of the Church, but with very little understanding of basic Christianity. I know how strange this must sound to you, but back then, we simply did what the Church told us to do. The idea of picking up a Bible and reading what it said wasn't even a thought that we had. We believed what the priests told us, without question. Of course, no one wanted to suffer the torments of hell. So we did as we were told. And what we were told was that all people have a little spark of good inside them. God gives you some grace to get things going, and then it's up to you to make your salvation sure by doing enough good in the world. I suppose another way of saying it is: we were taught that we could earn the grace of God by doing our best. So that's what we did.

That meant doing our best for our beloved dead. The Church had told us of a place called purgatory, a kind of holding tank for the souls of our departed loved ones. Their souls stayed there for thousands upon thousands of years, unless we did something about it. And we did our best. We spent our money on certificates called indulgences, which promised that our loved ones would escape purgatory more quickly and be in heaven sooner. Please understand, we were just doing what we were told.

In 1511, when I was 21 years old, a monk named Martin Luther was sent to Wittenburg to begin teaching at the university and preaching at the Castle Church in my town. This was news, but not big news. Everyone thought he had come to ask for more money to be sent to Rome. Were we wrong.

At first, Dr. Luther's preaching was not all that different than what we had heard before. But it seemed that the longer he stayed in Wittenburg; and the longer he studied and taught at the university, the more his messages changed. We started hearing more and more about a different Jesus than we were used to. We were used to Jesus the Righteous Judge, Jesus the Perfect Example of what we were to strive to be. The Jesus that Dr. Luther preached was different—he showed us Jesus our Savior; Jesus our loving sacrifice for sins. At first this was hard to understand because it was so different than anything we had heard before. But then one day Dr. Luther read to us a passage from Romans that said: "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." I'll never forget the way Dr. Luther explained that passage. He said, "If some complaint should be registered against a heart that believes in Christ, and testify against it concerning some evil deed, then the heart turns itself away, and turns to Christ, and says, 'But he made satisfaction. He is the righteous one, and this is my defense. He died for me, he made his righteousness mine and made my sin his own; and if he made my sin his own, then I do not have it, and I am free.'"

This, I had never heard before. It seemed too good to be true. I struggled to grasp what Dr. Luther was saying. I wanted very much for such words to be true for me, but I could not escape feeling "not good enough." I felt my sins had to disqualify me from God's favor. I approached Dr. Luther one evening about five years after he had come to Wittenburg, and I poured out my heart to him, confessing my guilt, my sinful acts. He looked me right in the eye, with a look of great compassion, and told me, "Learn Christ and him crucified; despairing of yourself, learn to pray to him, saying, 'You, Lord Jesus are my righteousness, but I am your sin; you have taken on yourself what you were not and have given me what I was not.'" I prayed that prayer for the rest of my life.

When I was 27 years old, Dr. Luther began publicly asking questions about the sale of

indulgences. On October 31, 1517, he posted his 95 theses against the sale of indulgences on the door of our church. His life would never be the same. Neither would my life, nor Wittenburg's, nor, dare I say, would the world ever be the same. Maybe you know the story of how Dr. Luther was excommunicated, how he went into hiding, how he came back to Wittenburg to preach and teach again. Maybe you know about his writings, such as the Small Catechism; maybe you have sung his hymns, like "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." And perhaps you know about the protection the German princes gave his fellow pastors when they made their statement of faith at Augsburg. You may even know how many millions of people worship in churches that were part of the Reformation that accompanied and followed Dr. Luther's work. Whether or not you know about those things, here's what I know.

Dr. Luther was my pastor. If it hadn't been for him, I would've purchased indulgences for my loved ones until the day I died, and then hoped that someone would buy them for me. If it hadn't been for him, I would've never had a Bible in my own mother tongue—the Scriptures in the German language! And if it hadn't been for him, I would've never known Jesus Christ the way the Bible describes Him—not as a frowning judge but as a loving brother, who went even to the cross to purchase my soul. It was also Dr. Luther who taught me that being a good husband and father and doing my job well honored God as much as a priest or pastor honored God with their duties. Was Dr. Luther a perfect man? He'd be the first to emphatically tell you "No." But he showed me who Jesus really was. I am eternally grateful.

That's my story; part of it, at least. But before I go, I have to ask you brothers and sisters who bear the Lutheran name, what is it like? What is it like to have the Bible so easily accessible—right in your own language, available everywhere? What is it like to have Jesus Christ clearly and rightly proclaimed in pulpit and classroom and home? Certainly the good news of Christ crucified and risen is still reforming the Church and the world, isn't it?