

# "God's Pursuit of Us"

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Reformation Sunday, October 25, 2015

Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483. Many of you also know that he has long been regarded to be one of the most influential people ever to have lived; so much so that the whole world paused to celebrate his **500<sup>th</sup> Birthday back in 1983**. Why even the **United States Post Office** did a special commemorative stamp in honor of the great Reformer that year. But, there is still no doubt that Martin Luther has been **remembered by many different people in many different ways** throughout the history! There have always been that **contingent of Christians who call themselves "Lutherans"** who tend to hail Martin Luther as some type of **spiritual superhero**. Do you know that according to some very recent statistics there are now some **80 million people who claim to be "Lutherans"** in the world today; about 10% of the reportedly 800 million people who call themselves "Protestants"!

**Of course, there is the other side of the story. For centuries, the Roman Catholic Church declared him to be a heretic and a rebel responsible for causing a split in the Catholic Church.** They will remind you that he even called the **pope the "anti-Christ" on a few occasions** and that he was eventually excommunicated from the church by **Pope Leo X in 1530** for that offense and others like it!

**Secular historians like to remind us that he had some less than admirable things to say also about the "Turks;"** who were the **Muslims alive** in Luther's day. And he has long been accused of promoting anti-Semitism. But if Martin Luther were to stand among us today, I believe he'd probably say something like this: **"Don't talk about me! There is nothing of any real importance that the world needs to know about me!"** But instead Luther might quote to us those great words that the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth one day: **"For I have determined to know nothing among you except for Jesus Christ and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2)!**

Why do I say this? Because shortly after he posted the 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg **he made a trip to Heidelberg** when he engaged in a disputation with his fellow Augustinian monks concerning the true nature and power of the Gospel in this world. And on that occasion he said: **"The only theology that has any real bearing upon this world is the theology of Christ and him crucified!"**

Martin Luther taught that the central message presented to us in the New Testament is over and over again the **theology of the cross, yet he knew there were some theologians alive in his day** (even as we know there are some in ours), who tried to suggest there is another way to lead people back to God apart from the message of the cross, through **philosophy, mysticism, morality, by means of human reason and the doing of good works;** all of which may at least point people into the direction of God; but that God is a God of majesty and not a God of the cross.

**Luther believed that the Christian faith is the only religion that talks about a God who came into this world to suffer, and not only to suffer alongside of us, to be suffer in our stead because for us through the perfect life on his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ.** And Luther believed that when we say that Jesus died on the cross, we are saying **much more than that a mere human being died on the cross for our sins, but that God himself died on the cross for our sins,** for Jesus is always true Man but also true God, conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

**450 years later the great German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who greatly protested the Nazi movement and particularly Hitler's mistreatment and slaughter of the Jews,** who died on that heinous dictator's scaffold because of it said the same thing: **"God allows**

**himself to be edged out of this world onto the cross and this is exactly the way (the only way) in which he can be with us and help us! Only a suffering God can help!"**

**Of what use is the theology of the cross to you and me?** In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul answers this question by expounding upon his doctrine of justification by God's grace through faith apart from works of the law. Luther said, **"The cross of Christ and the justification of sinners by faith are not two totally different and separate things! No, they are instead two sides of the same coin. Without the crucified Christ, there can be no justification of sinners in the sight of God!"**

You know how St. Paul puts all of this so beautifully for us in Romans, when he says first of all: **"I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith!'" (Romans 1:16-17)**

### **WHY HERE TODAY? SOMEBODY TOLD SOMEBODY ... WHO EVENTUALLY TOLD YOU!**

**The righteousness of God, now available freely to human beings everywhere, is revealed to this world by God.** It is not something we render to God but that God gives to us! **"Lord Jesus,"** Luther cried, **"you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin! You have taken upon yourself what you were not and you have given to me what I was not!"** Luther referred to this as God's **"Happy Exchange!"**

In the sending of his Son Jesus Christ into the world, our God has entered this world to seek and save us from a life of eternal separation from him because of our sins, and from the fear of death that he has conquered for us on our behalf. In the Father's sending of his Son into the world, and in the Son's willingness to go to the cross in our stead we see **God's pursuit of us!** And don't we remember how Jesus put all of this so very plainly one day when he said, **"The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which is lost" (Luke 19:10)!** And wouldn't this be the primary intent of our God in entering our world to establish the New Covenant that God promised to us in the prophetic ministry of Jeremiah in our Old Testament lesson today?

Brothers and sisters, because of his peoples' sinfulness and rebellion, God allowed the Babylonians to invade the southern kingdom of Judah two times. **The first time was in 598 BC and the second time took place twelve years later in 586 BC—because rather than King Zedekiah's trusting in the LORD God and his guidance for their deliverance, King Zedekiah chose to do some political maneuvering on his own to ensure his people's safety.** Unfortunately when the Babylonians were successful in invading Judah for a second time, they first murdered King Zedekiah's two sons in a brutal fashion right there in front of him, and then gauged out his eyes, so that would be the last thing he would ever see and the last thing he would ever remember before they carted him off to exile in Babylon.

**So the people of God were wondering if this was not going to suddenly be the end of everything! Was the covenant that God had established with Moses at Mount Sinai no longer intact?** Would God simply forget about it and turn his back on his people forever. Here God comes to the Prophet Jeremiah and through him speaks of God's pursuit of his people that would take place once more!

**"Behold the days are coming!" says the LORD when I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the Covenant that I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt; my Covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the Covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: 'I will put my law within them, and I**

*will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sins no more!"*

**Brothers and sisters, I learned something new this past week about this great Old Testament passage, the Old Testament passage that is quoted more frequently in the New Testament than any other Old Testament passage! While God was offended that the people repeatedly broke his commandments and violated the stipulations laid down for them in that Old Testament Covenant of the law given to them through Moses on Mt. Sinai, the thing that disheartened God the most is that their relationship with him as been destroyed!**

God had made the old covenant with their fathers, as their Father, and God had wed the people of Israel to become his very bride; that's why he says, *"Though I was a husband to them declares the LORD!"* But this time God is going to make an irrevocable commitment to the Hebrew people, a covenant that can no longer be broken by human disobedience and rebellion.

**And all of this points our way back to a covenant that God first made with the very first Patriarch Abraham way back in Genesis 15. There God told Abraham, whose name was actually still Abram, to gather some animals for a sacrifice. And Abram was to gather unto himself a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. And Abraham brought these and cut each one of them in half, and laid each half over against the other in two opposing rows. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep overtook Abram, and a dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Then the LORD said to Abram: "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation they serve and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions!"**

*When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates!" (Genesis 15:7ff)!*

To make a covenant, or to "cut" a covenant if we translate the Hebrew text most literally, the two parties making the covenant would then walk between the split carcasses, with the spoken or implied self-condemnatory oath that ***"may the same thing be done to me if I break this covenant!"***

**But in the covenant made with Abram, only the smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. These were signs of God's real presence there that day! But Abram was not instructed to walk between these two opposing rows of animal sacrifices.**

**That covenant was a unilateral covenant, just as the covenant that God would one day make with his people in the gift of his Son Jesus Christ would be a unilateral covenant. God will no longer take his Word and simply inscribe it on tablets of stone, he will write it on human hearts. God himself will come to live within us. And a result of his one day pouring out the Holy Spirit upon us, we would have direct experience of our**

**God and his love. You see Jesus is the one who paid the ultimate sacrifice not for his sins and rebellion, but for ours, for he himself was without sin!**

And can you see the great significance of those wonderful words when the LORD God says: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts”? The instructions given in the Sinai Covenant were inscribed on tablets of stone and later written down in documents; something external to the people of the covenant. But God will now ensure faithfulness within the lives of his people by making his new covenant something radically internalized—God will fill his people with his very own presence!

For us as the followers of Jesus Christ, we understand God’s New Covenant as having been inaugurated in Jesus and made available to all people through faith in his life, death, and resurrection. In Jesus Christ we truly have come to see “God inside us,” and “God with us” who is not against us but who graciously forgives us all our sins in the most radical way possible! This is why we can say with Paul in our epistle lesson today: *“The love of Christ controls us because we are convinced of this that one died for all, that we who live might live no longer for ourselves but for him who died and was raised again on our behalf!”*

Through the faith that God now pours into our hearts and minds through the Gospel we can join St. Paul in claiming as true for ourselves, what he boldly claims true as for himself: *“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me!” (Galatians 2:20)*

Martin Luther had just finished his undergraduate studies and was preparing for law school, when God seemed to begin to pursue him, Luther later recalled, **in a most powerful and personal way!** But the day came when he was walking through the forest on his way from home to the university when a terrible **thunderstorm broke out upon his path; replete with all sorts of loud clashing of thunder and lightning bolts piercing the earth all around him.** With the rain pouring down on him, the thunder rolling overhead, and lightning flashes all around him non-stop, young **Martin saw no sign of safe shelter anywhere! So he called out to God through St. Anne, the patron saint of safety, calling upon God for his help and promising that if his life were spared he would enter a monastery and become a monk:** “St. Anne, save me I will become a monk!”

Well, Martin did survive that storm. Some may call it fate and others might even label it as nothing more than a stroke of good luck! But Luther described it was **God’s personal blessing and guidance upon his life so that this young man, who formerly had had such big plans for a successful career as a lawyer actually wound up instead living out the earliest days of his adult life in a monastery.**

**BUT HERE’S SOME MORE GOOD NEWS WE CELEBRATE TODAY!**

Luther came to believe that through all of these events in his life God was personally pursuing him; leading him to a life in the church. But it did not end there. Luther immersed himself in both the monastic and the scholastic worlds as he taught at the University of Wittenberg. There he soaked inside of himself as deeply as he possibly could the **Holy Scriptures, teaching and preaching from the Old and the New Testament regularly in the Stadtkirche, known as St. Mary’s Church.**

**Spending time as a monk in isolation, Brother Martin had a great deal of time to reflect on his life. In doing so, Luther realized how far he fell short of what he should be. He was very aware of his inadequacies and his failings. He was sure that he was “un-loveable”—that even God could not love a person as despicable as him.**

**But in his study of the Bible, Luther discovered something else. He discovered a God who loves us so dearly, that we are being relentlessly pursued by him just as Luther was during that storm.** He discovered a God who would send the only Son—not for the perfect people, but for sinners. He discovered, above all else, a **God and a Savior that will NEVER abandon us;** that will stand by our side no matter how often we fail or how short we fail.

And before you know it, **Luther began to tell the world about this God! He began to talk about the God who adopts us as his beloved sons and daughters in the waters of our Baptism, and who never lets us go. He began to talk about the Christ who relentlessly pursues the lost sons and daughters of God into the darkest places of the world**—not to scold them but to save them. He began to talk about the Spirit that transforms our lives, so that even while we continue to sin we become more and more God-like and Christ-like in that process too.

For a variety of reasons, what Luther began to say to the world got him into trouble. He was thrown out of the church. The emperor sentenced him to death and put a price-tag on his head. So this young man, now about 35, who once had never thought about a life in the church, who thought he was unworthy of God's love, went into hiding because of his proclamation of God's love.

**Prince Charles of Saxony who befriended Luther however gave him a safe refuge in a castle called the "Wartburg Castle."** It was located high on a mountaintop just outside of the city of **Eisenach**. **There Luther became initially depressed, certain that God had surely abandoned him now and that he was deserving to feel unworthy of God's love. -- But God's love in Christ Jesus pursued Luther even to the mountaintop! There, once again, Luther encountered the light of Christ, creeping into even the darkest places in his life. He immersed himself totally once again in his study of the Holy Scriptures, translating the whole New Testament into German within the short span of three months.** And Luther left that mountaintop fortress even more convinced that **God will never abandon those who are adopted as God's sons and daughters in the waters of baptism.**

And isn't all of this what we celebrate too? Jesus spoke about that man who had 100 sheep and one went astray and what does that man do? Does he say to himself, "Oh, what's the big deal? I still have 99 sheep; foie on that one who wandered off!"? No this is not what that good shepherd says to himself at all! He leaves the others behind, no doubt in the good care of someone else, and pursues that sheep relentlessly until he finds it. And when he finds it, he brings it home upon his shoulders rejoicing!" Then Jesus says, ***"For surely I say to you, there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than there is over 99 righteous persons who needs no repentance!"***

Today God wants you to hear the message for yourself that Martin Luther, by the grace of God, came to hear as being true for himself: **"You are my beloved son or daughter, and I will pursue you wherever you go, and I will never let you go!"** Amen