

Commemoration of Martin Luther-Birth 11/13/16  
Hebrews 13:7

REMEMBER YOUR LEADERS, THOSE WHO SPOKE TO YOU THE WORD OF GOD. CONSIDER THE OUTCOME OF THEIR WAY OF LIFE, AND IMITATE THEIR FAITH.

Built on the Rock the Church shall stand  
Even when steeples are falling.  
Crumbled have spires in ev'ry land;  
Bells still are chiming and calling,  
Calling the young and old to rest,  
But above all the soul distressed,  
Longing for rest everlasting. (*LSB* 645:1)

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 own good works and, the problem with that is that our good works cannot earn peace with God.

On November 10, 1483, Martin Luther was born. And though his birth was not 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.

It is good for us to remember. The Gospels themselves are a narrative that recall the work of Jesus for us. The story of Jesus is told by human beings—yes, often clay jars that are easily broken—but simple human beings, nonetheless.

And so today we commemorate God's work through His humble servant Martin Luther. We do not do this for Luther's own sake; he is not the point. WE DO SO 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. Today, it is hard for us to think of him like that, given what an enormous role he would come to play in world history.

What set Martin Luther apart was his deep love for the Gospel. 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 we poor sinners can earn, 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. 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. Today, we have easy access to God’s Word, but basic human nature hasn’t changed. We are conceived and born in ignorance and superstition. We deny our sinfulness and our rebellion against God. People today are really no different spiritually 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.

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. *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 men 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).

And so today we look only to Christ. We know, as St. Paul teaches us, that no human being is justified by works of the law. Don't look to the world; don't look at the strength or weakness with which you believe; don't look to the things you do—including your church attendance; don't look to the good works you do for your neighbor; don't even look in your heart. Looking to yourself only shows us that you have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, that you deserve only God's displeasure, anger, and wrath. We will find no comfort there, no forgiveness there, only bondage to sin.

Look to Christ and Him alone. Christ truly is your comfort, hope, and joy. See that He has done all things well for you. He has earned God's favor. He has kept the Law in our place. Jesus has, by His suffering and death on the cross, appeased God's anger and turned away His wrath. And, 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 from your sin and its wages of death. And if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed! (cf. John 8:36).

God did a great work in the Reformation, but it is a work that is never done. We are in the world, but not of the world, so we must never become complacent. In the years following his death his followers identified Luther as the “third Elijah”.

There are good reasons people made the connection between Elijah and Luther. In the Old Testament, Elijah appeared from nowhere to challenge the religious status quo. Martin Luther did the same. Elijah was outspoken and confronted the religious and political leaders with their departure from God’s will. He bluntly told King Ahab that he had broken the laws of Moses in confiscating his subjects’ inherited property. He challenged the false prophets of Baal. He spoke directly with courage and conviction to those who were persecuting the faithful and proposing all sorts of false religious beliefs and practice.

Martin Luther did the same. At Worms, Luther stood before the Holy Roman emperor himself and refused to deny what he had learned from the Scriptures. “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason, I am bound by the Scriptures. . . . I cannot and I will not retract anything. . . . I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me.”

Further, Luther also reminded people of the second Elijah, John the Baptist. John’s message was simple and straightforward: repent and believe the Gospel. When Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on October 31, 1517, the first one read: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said ‘Do penance’ willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.”

God, through Martin Luther, began the Reformation by reminding people that the life of the Christian should be one of continual repentance

and faith. And both John and Luther pointed only to Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Lutheran Reformation was about Jesus Christ. It's still all about Jesus!

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.

Grant, then, O God, Your will be done,  
That, when the church bells are ringing,  
Many in saving faith may come  
Where Christ His message is bringing:  
"I know My own; My own know Me,  
You, not the world, My face shall see.  
My peace I leave with you. Amen." (*LSB* 645:5)