

Your Lutheran Heritage
Sermon on Jeremiah 31:31-34
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
Pastor Karl Walther
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Scripture said—and Martin Luther, and other Lutherans, have echoed it ever since: *I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes!* Amen.

God's Word for our special consideration on this celebration of the Festival of the Lutheran Reformation is Jeremiah chapter thirty-one, verses thirty-one through thirty-four:

"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."

This is God's Spirit-inspired Word regarding Jesus Christ.

Introduction: Lutheran Churches Celebrate the Lutheran Reformation

Dear fellow Christians, and especially on this Festival of the Lutheran Reformation, dear fellow Lutheran Christians:

You call yourself a Lutheran. You belong to a Lutheran church. Today, along with Lutheran Christians across the planet, you are celebrating the Lutheran Reformation. What does all of that mean?

Well, it's getting to be about five hundred years ago now. The year was fifteen seventeen AD. And across the world, back in Europe, in Wittenberg, Germany, to be exact: there lived a man named Martin Luther.

Martin Luther was a learned man. He had prepared himself to be a priest. He had become a professor of biblical studies, and had by now attained the ripe old age of thirty-three. As he had taught the Scriptures during the past few years, he found that his reverence for them was not matched by his church in his day. As he had studied the Bible during the past few years, he discovered the centrality of salvation through Jesus Christ, which was not taught by the church in his day.

So, four hundred eighty-eight years ago tomorrow, Martin Luther challenged all comers to a debate on these matters. He posted ninety-five statements on the public bulletin board of the day: the door of the Castle Church there in Wittenberg, Germany. And thus began the Lutheran Reformation.

Despite the deathly threats of the church of his day: this new Bible-based, Christ-centered reform movement grew rapidly—especially in the German states and in the Scandinavian countries. Despite the devil's hatred for these truths: this Bible-based, Christ-centered phenomenon – Lutheranism! – continues to this day.

Theme: Your Lutheran Heritage

In some ways, you could say that Luther was endeavoring to drag the church of his day out of an Old Testament mindset and into a New Testament mindset. That's how it is that today's sermon text got to be the standard Old Testament reading for Reformation Sunday.

It does a fairly good job of summarizing: (*) YOUR LUTHERAN HERITAGE. And you could rightly say that Your Lutheran Heritage consists in the following: (1) YOUR SINFULNESS IS REVEALED IN THE FAILURE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT & (2) YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS IS REVEALED IN CHRIST OF THE NEW TESTAMENT.

Part One: Your Sinfulness Is Revealed in the Failure of the Old Testament

Now, as God's Word to us today opens up: It was somewhere near the year five hundred eighty-six BC—some nearly two thousand six hundred years ago now. And the setting is more than halfway across the world; we're in the land of Judah.

Those were some tough days for the nation of Judah. The citizens of Judah were undergoing a series of exiles from their land. In six-oh-five BC, in five ninety-eight BC, and in five eighty-six BC: King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, in Mesopotamia, had mass-moved successively more Jewish people out of their homeland and into his—a thousand miles away. Not only were they away from home, but these exiles represented a loss of God's promises due to the guilt of his people.

The Prophet Jeremiah had the unenviable task of announcing these exiles. It earned him the nickname, "the weeping prophet". Nevertheless, in a few chapters in the middle of his prophetic book – these got to be known as Jeremiah's "Book of Consolation" – Jeremiah was privileged to offer his people some comfort.

And so, he said – and this is God's Word to us today – "*The time is coming*" – and those are "code words" for the New Testament era – "***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. A covenant was an official, friendly alliance—and this official, friendly alliance was between God and people.***

He goes on to say: This *new covenant*—***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.*** And that's worth explaining some more.

God had an *old covenant*, "The Old Testament", an old official friendly alliance between him and people. He established that he had the necessary power and love on behalf of his people to make this covenant when he rescued them out of Egypt. And so he said, a few months later, at Mount Sinai, "You see: I want you to be my special people. If you want to be my special people, it's really very simple: Follow these ten commandments. Build up and worship at this tabernacle, whose details I will deliver to you. Regularly make these four types of animal sacrifices. Three times a year, make a pilgrimage to my central place of worship. Avoid unclean things and unclean animals. And build your nation upon this set of laws, which I will give to you."

And how did the Israelites do, according to that Old Testament? Well, like it says here: "***They broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the LORD.*** Before Moses got down the mountain, the Israelites broke the very first commandment by constructing and worshipping a golden calf. At times they were willing to worship anywhere except at the tabernacle. They missed the meaning of the sacrifices. They

missed the meaning of the festivals. They became unclean. And there wasn't a law of God which they did not break.

But we'd have done no better! See, there's a rebellious sinful nature inside of us: we inherited it from our parents, and they from theirs, and it goes all the way back to those very first rebels: our ancestors Adam and Eve. There's a rebellious sinful nature inside of us that will break any set of laws God gives us, no matter what it is. God couldn't give us a rule without us wanting to break it!

And Martin Luther understood that. He knew there wasn't a law his church came up with: whether it required his people to say a certain number of prayers, or to pay a certain sum of money, or to pilgrimage to a certain place, or to maintain a particular standard of behavior—there wasn't a law his church came up with that he or his people could keep perfectly enough to merit God's favor. So, operating under an Old Testament mindset, he despaired. And so should we!

Part Two: Your Righteousness Is Revealed in Christ of the New Testament

However—however, God goes on: "*This is the covenant* – the new, official, friendly alliance – *I will make with the house of Israel* – and with you, and with me! – *after that time,*" declares the LORD.

And it's got basically four provisions: First, God says: "*I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.*" Second: *I will be their God, and they will be my people.* Third: *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. And fourth and finally: "*For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.*"

And those four provisions of the New Testament, under which we live, are worth looking at and appreciating, one at a time.

First, God says: "*I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.*"

And this is something new! Remember? Do you remember that: in the Old Testament, God's Law was written on tablets of stone? And in the church of Luther's day, the law was canon law, written on dusty old books in monasteries. And in too many churches in our day, the law is written in sermons and books that have only principles for earthly life, but not the pathway to eternal life.

But not for us!—not for us Bible-based, Christ-centered New Testament Christians, and especially not for us Lutherans! God has graciously put his teaching in our minds and written it on our hearts. He has taken away every exterior constraint toward us obeying him—because the Bible says that Christ crucified away for us the Old Testament law. And God has replaced it with something better. God has revealed his fatherly heart to us so brightly, so warmly, so broadly, so deeply, in the form of Jesus Christ ... that we can't help wanting to know him better and to please him more.

And now the second provision of the New Testament, under which we live: "*I will be their God, and they will be my people.*"

And this is something new! In the Old Testament, the Lord said, "I will be their God, only 'if'...—if they follow my laws, if they worship at the tabernacle, if they make those sacrifices, et cetera, et cetera." And in the church of Luther's day, it was as if the Lord was saying, "I will be their God, only 'if'...—if they pray enough, if they pay enough, if they pilgrimage enough, if they behave enough." And in too many churches in our day, it is as if the Lord is saying, "I will be their God, only 'if'...—if they prove themselves Christians enough to become Christians (as if that made any sense!)

But not for us Bible-based, Christ-centered New Testament Christians, and especially not for us Lutherans! God has become our God, and we have become his people—not "if", but "because"—because "Christ's holy body into death was given, life

to win for us in heaven”, and because “all our debt Christ has paid; peace with God once more is made.” (And incidentally – or maybe not so incidentally, eh? –those are Luther’s words from Luther’s hymns!)

Now the third provision of the New Testament, under which we live: ***“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.***

And again, this is something new! In the Old Testament, the Lord did have a class of Israelites whose job it was continually to urge the other Israelites, “Know the Lord!” He chose Aaron’s descendants, the priests, for that. He chose the prophets for that. He chose Levi’s descendants for that. And the church of Luther’s day was the same way. You know: you had your priests, and then higher: your bishops, and then higher: your archbishops and cardinals and so on. And in too many churches today there are still the run-of-the-mill Christians and then those who consider themselves the super-Christians.

But not for us Bible-based, Christ-centered New Testament Christians, and especially not for us Lutherans! We are equal! We have equal access to baptism, where Christ scrubbed our souls clean from sin. We have equal access to the Scriptures, where Christ’s shepherdly voice woos us to trust in him. We have equal access to Lord’s Supper, where Christ nourishes our souls with his saving body and blood. And while some of us: maybe especially those of us privileged to carry the name “pastor”—while God has given some of us the sacred and solemn responsibility to handle such holy things, we are still simply equal.

And the fourth and final provision of the New Testament under which we live: ***“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”***

And again, this is something new! In the Old Testament, there were always more *perversions*, there were always more *shortfalls* (that’s how these words literally read)—there were always more sins for God to remember. The animal sacrifices took away only what sins had happened—and then, not really permanently. In the church in Luther’s day, there were always contrived penalties to pay for perversions and shortfalls. And in too many churches today, it’s exactly the same way: God won’t forgive you, if you’re too sinful.

But not for us Bible-based, Christ-centered New Testament Christians, and especially not for us Lutherans! God has pardoned our perversions! It happened two thousand years ago, when he executed Christ Jesus for us on the cross. And of course, that’s what gives us the power, and that’s what gives us the motivation, to overcome the perversion of our sins. God remembers our shortfalls no more! It happened two thousand years ago, when Christ Jesus rose triumphant, and left our sins buried in his grave! And of course, that’s what gives us the power, and that’s what gives us the motivation, more and more to overcome that shortfall by way of our service to Christ.

Conclusion: Lutheran Christians Celebrate their Lutheranism

So, that’s Your Lutheran Heritage—based on the Bible alone, centered on Christ alone, fully confessing your sinful rebellion, fully confessing Christ’s salvation.

And would you believe that the majority of churches that call themselves Lutheran are shy about that—and even deny it? Not us!!! The Scriptures are God’s true words—every single solitary one of them! Where else could we possibly find our certainty?! Faith in Christ’s bloody, sacrificial suffering and death is the only pathway to salvation! Where else could we possibly find comfort?!

That’s Your Lutheran Heritage: this Reformation Sunday—and forever!!! Amen.

Scripture said—and Martin Luther, and other Lutherans, have echoed it ever since: *In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith in Christ from first to last, just as it is written: The righteous will live by faith!* Amen.