**Reformation Sunday**

**October 29, 2023**

**Psalm 46; John 8:31-36**

Pastor Julia Seymour, Big Timber Lutheran

Grace and peace to you, friends across Montana and northern Wyoming, on this festival day, from our Creator, Savior, and Sustainer- one God, now and forever.

Lutheran churches around the state and world observe the festival of the Reformation with many traditions-

* The color red, which symbolizes the on-going work of the Spirit
* Scripture readings in the local language, celebrating the work of translation and the gift of the written word to all people
* Favorite hymns, often including *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*
* Prayers with hope for God’s continued reforming work in the world, shaping the church to the Divine will for Christ’s own sake.

In the past, we have occasionally been more than a little triumphalist as Lutherans, extolling the virtues of the Reformers and decrying the bad habits of the medieval church. Yet, holy observances are never meant to lift up the work of people. The festivals of the church point to God’s work- work in history, work in the present, promised work in the future. We gather together to give glory to God.

The scriptures for today have strong words reminding us of what God has done. The prophet Jeremiah speaks a word to the people in exile about a new covenant, a restoring promise from the Lord, which will be written on their hearts. Paul teaches the Christians in Rome that everyone is equal in sin before the Lord, and everyone receives equal access to the grace of God through Christ’s faithfulness.

In John, those who are listening to Jesus are surprised by his words. They say that they have never been enslaved, and yet God’s work of the exodus is their core story. They are bound by the story they tell themselves, a narrative about their own control, rather than one that gives thanks and praise to God for faithfulness and salvation already achieved. Jesus warns them of the dangers of their story and its false premise and promise. True freedom indeed comes from God, and it was standing, in the flesh, before them.

Psalm 46, the basis for the hymn *A Mighty Fortress*, praises the power of God- stronger than both human forces and acts of nature. God’s strength is both defense and offense for all who trust in the Creator. The language, however, makes some interesting points.

Let us consider, briefly, verses 8 and 9:

*Come, see the Lord’s deeds,
    what devastation he has imposed on the earth—*

*bringing wars to an end in every corner of the world,
    breaking the bow and shattering the spear,
        burning chariots with fire.*

What is the devastation that the Lord causes, according to the psalmist? It is the ending of war. The bringing of peace brings devastation to the earth. The end of the weapons of war, the conclusion of the rumors of war, the elimination of the terror of violence- this is the work of the hand of God.

Why is the end of war devastating?

Because it shatters lies about control. War is about dominance, about power, about winners and losers. War and its fellow travelers- death, chaos, pain, and uncertainty- are the tools of the forces that oppose God, the forces that we renounce at our baptism. They are evil. They tell lies. We forcefully reject them. They oppose God's true and on-going *reformation* work- revelation of love, restoration of relationship, and resurrection in the face of death.

If God's devastating work, to be brought to fruition in creation, is the end of war- in all its forms, then the people of God are called to be at that work. We do not go to this work to save ourselves. It is the work we are about **because** we have been saved.

It is the joy of our salvation, of trusting that we have been made right with God and not by our own selves, that allows us to take up work in our homes, in our backyards, in our neighborhoods, in our city, in our state, in our country, and in the world.

And the work we are called to do, then, is God's own call to bring an end to war.

We are called to end the actual violence of war that comes about through political contests of will. We are called to end the war of sexual violence against women, girls, and all who identify as female. We are called to end the war of racism- in all its forms, including in established and venerated institutions, within our justice system, and in our own hearts and minds. We are called to end the war of violence, exclusion, and hate against our siblings and neighbors, even if we do not agree with them.

We are called to end the war of people versus the environment, remembering that the careful stewardship of creation is our first vocation as human beings. We are called to end the war that denies mental illness, lies about its causes, and ignores treatment and possibilities for healing.

If God's devastating plan is to end war, then let it begin! And let it begin with us.

It is no small thing- to decide to be on the side of God's work to end war.

It means, truly, to think about what Jesus would do. It means to pray for a peacemaking heart, beginning in our closest relationships. This is not a heart of enabling or accepting pain, but a heart that seeks to speak the truth, end oppression, and to work for the healing of the world.

This is hard work.

The work of war- on-going fighting- is easier, to be sure, because it allows the illusion of control and permits the inflicting of pain to those who are in our way. War seems easier than peace because peace means a willingness to see, to accept, and to respond to the humanity of another person or group of people. Furthermore, peace means accepting that the other person or people are equally beloved by God and have *also been justified*(or made right with God) *in the same manner as us.*

Today we remember that reformation wasn’t simply a period in history, it is what God did, is doing, and will do until Christ comes again. God’s reformation happens through each of us, through our hands, feet, words, skills, time, and offerings. The main focus of God’s reforming work is to remind each of us and the world that there is only one God, and we are not Him. God’s good truth is devastating, but only to those who haven’t yet known it as a fortress, a storehouse of hope, and the shelter from the storms of the world.

May we be open to how the Spirit continues to reform us and our communities, making each of us more and more fully who and what God has called and shaped us to be. Amen.