

Sermon for Reformation Day (observed)

“This Momentous Time”

Romans 3:19-28

10/28/18b

In the name of Jesus.

Martin Luther lived in a momentous time. A few generations before Luther, a German blacksmith named Johannes Gutenberg invented a machine which revolutionized information and the way it was spread. Gutenberg’s invention, which came before the world around the year 1440, was known as the mechanical moving type printing press. With this new tool, it became possible to produce a vastly larger volume of printed materials, which could be shared with many, many people. Born in 1483, Martin Luther would personally experience during his lifetime how powerful this invention could be, and what its ramifications could be.

Another way in which Luther lived in a momentous time was exploration. In Luther’s day European nations were sending their intrepid explorers around the world. Mariners sailed both eastward and westward from their European homelands, seeking to discover new places and people and especially new trade routes and the wealth these could bring. We are most familiar with the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus. In 1492, while Luther was a schoolboy, Columbus made his first of four voyages westward across the Atlantic Ocean from Spain, coming to stop very near our shores, in what we now call the Caribbean Islands. Columbus and the other explorers of his day, such as the Portugese Ferdinand Magellan and Vasco da Gama, contributed to tremendous changes that were felt in Luther’s German homeland and all around the world. It was a momentous time.

We live in a momentous time—and I’m not just talking about life and politics in America on the eve of another election day. Just consider the world-changing invention of *our* day, the powerful information-

crunching machine called the computer. Since their first appearance as room-sized machines in the middle of the 20th century, computers have advanced to the point where they are part of almost every aspect of our lives. In 2018 computers, which are now so tiny they can be held in the palm of your hand, or worn around your wrist, play such a fundamental role in our economy and in our society that it would be hard to overstate it! Life as we know it could not be without the computer—and to think it all boils down to ones and zeros! Like it or hate it, this is life and technology today.

Another way in which we live in a momentous time is discovery and exploration. Planet Earth long since having been surveyed and explored by the brave and the curious, we have in our lifetime seen men venture outward and upward, into space. In the summer of 1969, while I was tucked away in my mother's womb, American astronauts landed on the moon. To this day scientists and engineers around the world are busy trying to push the limits of where we can explore and what we can see beyond our planet. Our NASA organization even includes astrobiologists and so-called exobiologists, who want to know, among other things, whether life might exist outside Earth. At the same time, other scientists move in the opposite direction, probing not outward but inward, trying to learn as much as they can (and they have learned a lot) about the human body and how it works, and about matter and how it is structured and how it works. Human accomplishments in all these areas are breathtaking. It is a momentous time.

And yet, more—yes, far more—momentous than human doings and developments and discoveries, it is God's doings which He performs according to His righteousness that truly set apart a time as “momentous”. Today's text from Romans 3 presents the great work of the one true God, the righteous and eternal God and Creator of all things. Today's text from Romans 3, written by the apostle Paul about 1,950 years ago, tells of a time truly momentous. This was the time when God sent—from heaven down into our human flesh—His own Son into our world to go the cross for us, as our Savior from sin...and also the

subsequent time when God then caused the Gospel of salvation by faith in the risen Jesus to be published and preached to all nations. Momentous time.

I came to focus on this idea of a “momentous” time by reading Michael Middendorf’s recent new commentary on Romans. Middendorf translates Romans 3:26 “toward the proof of his (that is, God’s) righteousness *in the present momentous time*” (*Romans 1-8* from Concordia Publishing House, © 2013, p. 270). Our translation just says “at the present time” but Middendorf’s own translation is “the present momentous time”. Both are appropriate translations from the original Greek words, but Middendorf’s certainly conveys something more to us. “The present momentous time”—it means that God, the righteous God, His sending His Son for sinners and for our salvation, and God, the righteous God, His causing the powerful Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus to be published, to be preached and taught and shared, *those* acts of God make these days since the first Easter, *these days in which we live*, momentous indeed.

We so easily grow dulled to the significance, so the Holy Spirit on this Reformation Sunday re-awakens our minds and hearts to the *momentousness* of it all—God’s work in Christ, God’s work for us!

We remember today how Martin Luther, reading Scripture and learning its Spirit-breathed message, came to understand for the first time the grace of God. Martin Luther, you remember, was a devout young member of the Roman Catholic Church, an ardent and very earnest man, who it’s fair to say excelled his peers in devotion as well as intellectual ability. After starting toward a career in law, Luther had a dramatic turning point in which he switched to theology. Luther became a monk in a strict religious order, the Augustinians. As a monk he poured himself into the life and discipline of his order, always striving to please God. Driving so much of Luther’s decisions and actions was an agonized search for peace with God—peace which he never found in the doctrinal teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, nor in the self-denial

and severity of religious practices as a monk. Doing what was within you in order to ensure that God, in return, would grant you grace (this was a common belief and motto of the day)...it never worked for Luther. Though he did more than almost anyone, tried harder than anyone, fought inwardly and struggled against sin harder than them all, it never led Luther to peace but rather to a terrifying uncertainty about salvation.

Though Luther may have seemed to observers—and may seem to observers today—to have been too extreme, too hard on himself, the opposite is actually true. Romans three:

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. ²⁰ Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

St. Paul here teaches that God's Law demands perfection—a perfection which no man achieves and which no man can attain. The Law accuses...of idolatry and self-love...and the Law condemns, for we are all sinners guilty in the sight of God. You can deny it, you can whitewash it, you can try to run away from it, but you can't hide. God's Law stands fast. Well-deserved judgment looms. Luther was all too correct.

You know, Luther might have given thanks to God for bringing him to this dark and frightening place of spiritual despair, because it allowed him to appreciate the amazing grace of God in a way that few before him had experienced. The Spirit, using the Bible's clear message, revealed to Martin Luther something altogether new to Luther's mind—that although our sin must be condemned and punished by the holy, righteous God, nevertheless that same holy, righteous God planned to release us from guilt and eternal damnation by the glorious intervention of His own true and eternal Son, Jesus Christ, our God in our flesh. This happened by the shedding of His blood in our stead, in our place, on the cross. St. Paul writes:

²¹ But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith...”

Here Paul relates the beautiful Gospel—God’s message to us regarding Jesus and the gift of salvation. Paul relates the truth that God sent His Son Jesus to die so that fallen sinners like us might be reckoned to be right and good in God’s sight—this is the meaning of being “justified”.

Martin Luther, with joy and delight, came to realize that God accepted him, truly accepted him—and this not on account of his own piety or good works, his own sufferings, self-denial, prayers, fastings, what-have-you...*but rather God accepted Martin Luther* because of the merits of Jesus! Thus, Luther began to live before God with a glad heart that trusted and believed God’s promise. Luther could come to Jesus and “find rest for [his] soul” (Matthew 11:28). To use Jesus’ language from today’s Reformation Gospel, Martin Luther could take the freedom offered by God’s own Son, and through faith in Jesus Luther could be “free indeed” (John 8:36).

Freed therefore by God’s grace, freed by the message of justification by faith in Christ, Luther set about to teach and preach this biblical truth whatever the cost. Though Luther might have to die, his enemies fiercely and murderously opposing him and his message, yet what did he care? He believed God’s promise that eternal life was his, freely given by God through the Gospel. So Luther lectured and taught. Luther preached and instructed. Luther studied and translated Scripture. Luther wrote and published and defended the faith. Luther prepared catechisms—handbooks of instruction in the faith, and prayer books for

Christian daily devotion—his Small Catechism of 1529 being used among us to this very day.

Luther accomplished much in service to God during that momentous time—but boast about himself Luther did not. Luther knew, as Paul taught in our text, that since salvation was by faith in Christ alone, and not at all by our works, that therefore boasting was excluded (Romans 3:27). The peace-giving Gospel of Christ led Luther and other believers of his day only to heartfelt gratitude and praise.

Martin Luther lived at a momentous time—when God restored that ancient Gospel message to the church in its purity and clarity, and to the world that needed it.

We live in a momentous time, too. For all that was true for Luther continues to be true for us. We cannot satisfy by our own strength the demands of God's Law. We fail every day. Whether we are husbands or wives, parents or children, bosses, workers, teachers, students, pastors, parishioners, whether we are old or young, male or female, rich or poor or in between, God's Law silences our mouths, for we have all fallen short of the glory of God, and none of us has any excuse. But the Gospel Luther came to believe, that Gospel is still preached among us, and the promise of free salvation that God makes through the Gospel continues to offer us peace and gladness. For the Gospel continues to announce what God's righteousness led Him to do: offer His Son as a "propitiation"—that is, a bloody sacrifice that turns aside God's wrath against us, a sacrifice that reconciles us to God. The Gospel is God's invitation to us to believe that He loves us and counts us good and right, holy and pure. What could be more momentous than when God enters into your life to deliver to you a message of good news: you are forgiven, you are loved, you will live, *eternally!*

Often we get deceived—deceived into viewing this world as all that there is...deceived into focusing on ourselves and forgetting God, deceived into thinking that man's accomplishments are the be-all and

end-all. But the Bible brings God's reminder near: God is the ultimate reality, the source of our lives and all that there is, and nothing, *nothing* matters as much as God, His will, His Word. Astonishingly and amazingly, even though we are all sinners, God offers forgiveness and eternal life freely to everyone, inviting all to repent and believe in His Son. This is God's grace. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. He laid all our sins upon His Son. This was God's righteousness.

We need not and cannot earn God's love or favor, but His love and favor are already there for us, having been earned by another, by Jesus Christ, our friend and Redeemer.

This is a momentous time in which we live, indeed. But it is momentous not primarily because of computers, space exploration, or other scientific advances. This is a momentous time in which we live for the same reason that Luther's time was momentous: because of God, because of Jesus Christ, and because of the Gospel—because we *and our neighbors* today are also the ones for whom Jesus died and rose again, and because God wants them, with us, to know this and believe it.

Until Jesus returns to take us home, may God use us to awaken the world to this momentous time. Amen.