

**Sermon, October 25, 2020**  
**Reformation Sunday**

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome our Handbell Choir, which has been practicing wearing masks, socially-distanced with the windows open for a few weeks now. They are providing Special Music for our worship this morning. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases, COVID hospitalizations and deaths are again rising. Both the CDC and our own ELCA say people who are at high risk for serious illness from Coronavirus should NOT attend indoor worship services in person, and those who regularly spend time with families or friends in high risk groups shouldn't either.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily. Which is why we are here, worshipping together even though safely apart. If you have friends or family members who do not have internet service, you can easily record this service on your laptop and sit down and share it with them. I would be glad to show you how. Meanwhile, if you want to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is [stmarksoakland.com](http://stmarksoakland.com) (no spaces or caps) Now today's stupid joke.

Today all over the world we Lutherans celebrate the 503rd anniversary of the Reformation. Reformation Sunday, in my opinion, should begin with a good Lutheran joke. How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb? Five.  
One to actually change the light bulb.

And four to go out to lunch and complain that, truth be told, they really liked the old bulb better. And then of course all of them will feel really guilty afterwards.

*Music*

**The Lord be with you. Let us pray.**

Almighty God, gracious Lord, we thank you that your Holy Spirit renews the church in every age. Pour out your Holy Spirit on your faithful people. Keep them steadfast in your word, protect and comfort them in times of trial, defend them against all enemies of the gospel, and bestow on the church your saving peace, through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

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**A reading from Jeremiah, the thirty-first chapter.**

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says 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. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

**Here ends the reading.**

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## **The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the twenty-third chapter.**

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.

And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father--the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

## **The Gospel of the Lord.**

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**Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.**

I was going to preach a 500 year-old sermon written by Martin Luther for this special day. But the shortest one I could find is five times longer than any I have ever preached. Plus I'm not comfortable using that kind of language in church. So let me just open by saying, "Hi, I'm Scott, and I'm a Lutheran."

As I referenced in my stupid joke, some think there is nothing more Lutheran than guilt and complaining. Well, maybe. But I don't know how or why we ever got the reputation of being timid or resistant to change. Especially since our founder Martin Luther was arguably the boldest figure in the history of Western Civilization, who many say brought about more change to both the Church and society than any other human being. Ever!

As I know I have mentioned before, if you attended a public school, you can thank Luther. He was the first to advocate for a free public education system and, hundreds of years ahead of his time, insisted those schools should be open to both boys AND girls. I mentioned last week that Luther's "two kingdoms" principle is at least partly responsible for the American notion of the separation of Church and State. His point wasn't that faith has no role in public service. But that the church has no business in politics, and vice versa.

Do you like singing hymns and having music as a regular part of worship? Credit Luther. Can you read the Bible in your own language? Thank Luther. Do you understand the words we say and sing in our Liturgy? Again, Thank Luther.

Do you appreciate the fact that along with the sacraments, the sermon is now the focal point of Christian worship? Okay, you don't have to answer that! But if you do, thank Luther. And remember that when sermons run a bit long, many credit Luther or at least some of his early followers with the invention of the church pew. Prior to the Reformation worshipers stood in church for the entire service. Today I got so caught up in the rich history of Lutheran change that I changed the gospel lesson. It's different from the one printed in your Celebrate bulletin insert. But there's a reason for that.

The ELCA's Churchwide Assembly voted fifteen years ago to accept some changes in our lectionary.

One of them was no longer requiring the same old lessons over and over again every single year on Reformation Sunday. Apparently the Celebrate Bulletin insert folks haven't warmed up to the idea yet...Which is understandable. They live in Minneapolis. And... they are Lutherans.

Frankly, I can't imagine a more appropriate gospel lesson for Reformation Sunday than the regular reading scheduled today from Matthew. It's where an outspoken and devoutly faithful visionary dared to call the religious hierarchy of his day on the carpet.

Today Jesus accused the grand religious muckety-mucks of being hypocrites, who did not practice what they preached. He said they fabricated unnecessary and burdensome rules and hoisted them on the shoulders of the gullible laity.

He said religious leaders demanded special honors and respect that they really didn't deserve. In other words, today Jesus sounded pretty much like Martin Luther, only without all the swearing and name-calling.

Jesus told the crowds that their religion wasn't broken, but the Church and its leaders were. They had corrupted the faith for their own personal gain. Luther said pretty much the same thing, at a time when the Church's ethics had hit a new low.

It was the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century, during the papacy of Julius the second, and his successor Leo the Tenth. Both spent money like kids in a candy store on new construction, renovation and beautification of the Vatican, while much of Europe suffered extreme poverty, famine and widespread death from a resurgence of the Bubonic Plague. Please note the parallels with what we are going through these days.

Don't get me wrong, the Vatican renovations WERE magnificent. Julius had the Sistine Chapel at St. Peter's re-done, hiring a well-known and highly acclaimed artist to paint the ceiling. His frescoes were

unveiled on October 31, 1512, and folks flocked from all over Europe to see the magnificence Michelangelo had created.

Problem was ALL the artists, sculptors and contractors expected to be paid, and the Vatican treasury was pretty much tapped out. So the pope and his friends created new ways to compel sick, starving European peasants to hand over even more of their meager resources to the church.

Julius and then Leo preyed on their faith, as well as their fears and ignorance by selling them what were called “indulgences”—certificates that supposedly “purchased” God’s forgiveness for past and present sins. They could even buy forgiveness for their deceased family members-if the price was right. The concept was remarkably popular in a time when so many loved ones had been lost to famine or plague.

Luther was appalled. So five hundred three years ago this coming Saturday, on the eve of All Saints Day and fifth anniversary of the unveiling of the Sistine Chapel, Augustinian Monk and seminary professor Dr. Martin Luther posted his now-famous 95 Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences. Legend has it he nailed his list to the chapel door of the Castle Church in a sleepy little college town called Wittenberg, Germany. The document exposed, condemned and called for the end of the sale of indulgences.

But Luther was seeking only a reformation, not a revolution. This was neither an act of rebellion nor defiance. Luther simply wanted to talk over some mistakes he thought the church he loved and served faithfully was making.

The chapel door was essentially the campus bulletin board of Wittenberg. His theses were proposed talking points for the upcoming university seminar, which was the highlight of autumn weekend campus life back in his day. Apparently, like my alma mater--the University of Maryland, Wittenberg, didn’t really have a football team.

Unlike many Lutherans in our time, Martin was happy to put his name on and own up to his list of complaints against the Church and invite face-to-face discussion. He even sent signed copies to church higher ups, like Albrecht, the archbishop of Mainz, Thinking maybe Albrecht didn't know about the corrupt practices of those beneath him. But of course he did. And strongly encouraged them. Oops.

Word about Luther's list eventually got back to Pope Leo in Rome. Who wasn't amused. But Luther kept speaking-out. And kept writing, exposing more and more heresy and hypocrisy in the Church as the months passed. Like Jesus, he "out-ed" too much corruption for his own good. While temple authorities conspired to have Jesus killed, Church authorities had Luther excommunicated and sentenced to death.

Luther was no saint, and he would be the first to tell you that. He was quick-tempered, brash, and at times vulgar and rude. His anti-Semitic writings toward the end of his life shocked and embarrassed his friends and followers; and centuries later were misused to help justify the horrors of the Holocaust.

As champion of the common folk you'd think he would have supported the European Peasants' Revolt. He didn't. Sinner? You bet! But according to him we are all both saints and sinners, and Luther as a saint stood above most with the courage of his convictions and deep-seated faith in Jesus Christ. Even if not so much in his Church in the Middle Ages.

I believe ALL Christians should be proud of Luther, even to this day. And not just because of things he wrote or did or said 500 years ago. Because I think Luther's reforms are as relevant today as they were then. Martin Luther taught that the Church should always remain in a state of reformation, and thanks largely to him, ours has.

When Katy Luther left the nunnery, there was no official place for her in Luther's Church because of her gender. The only church office for a

Lutheran woman was “pastor’s wife.” Not so today. The Seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America now prepare more women than men for Ordination.

Lutheran Scholars spearheaded modern Biblical Scholarship, which has helped to keep ancient scripture vibrant, relevant and meaningful across time, space and culture. Despite the Church schism often blamed-on or credited-to him, Martin Luther hoped that someday the Church would again be one. And the ELCA and its partners around the world have led the way in ecumenism, working harder than anyone toward the unity of the Church.

While our critics both within and without claim we are stuffy and stodgy and set in our ways, truth is we Lutherans have undergone more transformation and have been more open to new ideas than any other denomination or for that matter any other religion on the face of earth, as we continue to keep Christ Crucified at the very center of our life together.

Despite his flaws, I admire Luther. In fact, sometimes I fancy myself to be a little bit like him. After all, Luther loved his wife, and his pet dog. Me too. Luther loved to laugh. I love to laugh. Luther liked to read and write and study scripture. I like to read and write and study scripture. Luther liked to sing. I like to sing. And play the lute—the forerunner of the guitar. I play guitar.

They say Luther drank a lot of beer. I play guitar. And today this native Presbyterian is proud to be a Lutheran. And I even admit to feeling a little guilty...about...not feeling guilty.

**Amen**

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