

The Reformed Institute of Metropolitan Washington
Preaching Aid
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Reformation Day

What does it mean to be the church of Jesus Christ today? This is a dangerous question because this is a question for the present with implications for daily living. And this question frames our context for preaching on Reformation Sunday. A brief review of the celebration of Reformation Day will help set the stage for why this is so.

According to mid-16th century documents, it was October 31, 1517 when Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses on the door of All Saints Church (also known as Castle Church), in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther was objecting to church practices, particularly the sale of indulgences as a popular way of participating in supposed good works that could justify one's self before God. When reading the Theses it is helpful to keep in mind that Luther's intention was to object to such questionable church practices, not to form a new Church. The Theses challenged many church practices and included instead an emphasis on salvation by grace through faith and the centrality of the Word.

The 95 Theses were translated into German and became accessible, thanks to the printing press, throughout much of Europe by December of that year. By the mid-16th century churches were holding an annual Reformation Day celebration in October or November. Now, in some countries and European regions, Reformation Day is a civic holiday. Today most churches transfer the festival so that Reformation Sunday is held on the Sunday on or before October 31st and All Saints Day is celebrated on the Sunday on or after November 1st. The lection cycle for Lutherans appoints texts for The Festival of the Reformation: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36. The PC(USA) planning calendar retains the Revised Common Lectionary texts for this Sunday.

Preachers who work with the Revised Common Lectionary texts will balance the foci of this Sunday's texts with the focus of Reformation Day (instead of working with texts that have been especially selected for the themes of Reformation Day). In other words, those of us working with the RCL texts treat Reformation Day as our contemporary context that we lift up to be addressed by the reading of these biblical texts for this day. Remember: the RCL texts are not selected so that we preach some past event of the life of Christ or the church, as if we are looking backward in time. The texts are appointed so that we see our contemporary selves according to the rhythms and claims of the texts. We are to trust that these texts will have a claim on those of us who celebrate Reformation Day, 2010.

There are many Reformation Day themes we could highlight through our preaching: reliance on the witness of the Scriptures; God guiding the Church in Word and Spirit; Christ's presence in his body, the Church; the unity of the Church; the Church in relation to the justice in the world. But here is an overarching theme: what does it mean to be the church of Jesus Christ today? There is good news embedded in this question. There is the promise by the triune God known to us in Jesus Christ that we are his church, his body. And that the realm of God extends to the public sphere. To ask, therefore, about being the church of Jesus Christ today means that we roll up our sleeves and make choices about faithful living and witness in the world. Reformation Day is not simply a day with an eye toward a past heritage. The very nature of the celebration insists we articulate again the

claim of the gospel of the crucified and risen one on our lives and our world. It means we continue to ask ourselves how we live according to the freedom we have in the grace of Jesus Christ. We will not have all the answers by this one Sunday. But we can work to articulate the witness of these texts for us in our 21st century United States context on Reformation Day, 2010.

We start with the gospel reading. Even though it is not the first reading according to the order of the canon, the RCL system selects the readings in relation to the gospel reading. The gospel account is a hermeneutical key to working with the texts of the day. Luke 19:1-10 is the story of Zacchaeus, the wealthy tax collector who works for the Romans. He is therefore held in low regard in two ways because he is rich and is considered to be a traitor to his people. Zacchaeus is one of those Lukan characters exemplifying Jesus' divine compassion to those on the margins, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." (19:10) Luke's account emphasizes God's mission to all people. It is interesting then to recall that historians think of Luke's account as an urban account: the Greek represents different literary styles, there is great detail about Judaism and about Palestinian locations. This gospel account witnesses to a universal savior, the mission of God, and the nearness of the kingdom. The Zacchaeus account emphasizes discipleship: becoming one of the people of God means living as a citizen of God's realm. Zacchaeus becomes a typology: he experiences conversion and this change manifests both inwardly and outwardly (19:6, 19:8).

The Old Testament reading comes to us according to the continuous reading track of the RCL. Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4 is not appointed in specific relation to the gospel reading but in relation to it being Year C. Year C matches readings from the prophetic books with the gospel according to Luke. The first four verses of Habakkuk certainly articulate contemporary headlines: corruption and violence seem to reign supreme. In the face of international wars, God's sovereignty is questioned. A response to this comes in 2:1-4. The prophet is told to stand at the watchpost because God will give a vision for the appointed time. We are assured that there will be a divine response to the violence and destruction of the time. The preacher could explore the image of Habakkuk as sentry up in the watchpost and Zacchaeus up in the tree who literally sees the vision made manifest in Jesus Christ. Perhaps we can say that Zacchaeus even wrote the vision, making it plain for all to see, (Habakkuk 2:2): a gift to the poor is a response to the living savior (Luke 19:8).

The Psalm of course is appointed to be a congregational sung response to the Old Testament reading. On this Reformation Sunday congregations could recover (or continue!) this practice, singing a setting of Psalm 119: 137-144.

II Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-2 includes words of greeting and assurance that the author of this letter and his fellow workers are praying for this church so that every good effort by this community comes to fruition (1:11). Right away these words pick up echoes from the Old Testament reading: the assurance to the prophet that God will bring about what God intends to bring to completion. Yet at the same time this book emphasizes the fact that the church exists in this world, in a time of imperfection and unresolved struggles (1:4). The prophet Habakkuk voices lament in the face of violence and destruction. The writers of this letter voice praise for the community because of their steadfastness in the face of afflictions. Both voices are true.

Preachers may want to focus on Zacchaeus this Sunday. He searches out this Jesus and sees him. Jesus comes to his house that very day. Zacchaeus converts inwardly and outwardly. These events in the life of one man pull on several themes of the day: the universal savior is also all-knowing of this particular man; the one who manifests the kingdom of God comes to his (our) house that very day; the conversion has internal and external

ramifications. We might use Reformed language of justification and sanctification to talk about this event. There is the punctiliar quality of our conversion to the truth that is the triune God's claim on the world but there is also our ongoing turning to God, every day, as we grow in the likeness and image of Christ. And, this turning involves what we do with the stuff of our lives. This turning is made evident by our work in the public sphere. In this story possessions are given away to the poor and rectitude is made to those who have been cheated. But this turning may very well also be our lament about the state of things (drawing on Habakkuk) and our fortitude to endure (and affect) these things in light of God who calls us (II Thessalonians 1:11). These themes suggest ways that the preacher can draw out the Reformers question: what does it mean to be the church of Jesus Christ today? It means, at least in part, to be engaged with our world, to do right by the needy and the lowly ones, to call out and lament violence and affliction, and even to endure affliction as a sign of God's vision which will have the last word. Taking a lead from the story of Zacchaeus we can announce that God changes us (thanks be to God!). And this sudden and ongoing change is for the living of these days.

Or, preachers may want to focus on the tensions around telling time that come through in these texts. In Luke Jesus comes to Zacchaeus on that very day (19:5). Yet in both Habakkuk and II Thessalonians there is a sense of waiting on God to act because God's fulfillment will be sometime in the future. In Luke the revelation is present tense and in the other accounts it is a future promise into which we lean. What does it mean to be the church of Jesus Christ today? It means to be assured that the fullness of revelation is known in Jesus Christ and simultaneously to know there is a not yet quality to this truth. And so, in between times, we rightly wonder how we can be instruments of God in the world and what next steps are expected of us in these days for faithful witness and living. The salvation of the world has come – and – is out in front of us with a call and a vision for us to write for the laments and afflictions of the world.

What does it mean to be the church of Jesus Christ today? This is a Reformation Day question because it is a question about the church in the world now. It is not a question about faithfulness according to a fixed rule or even a 16th century theologian. But, taking a cue from our 16th century ancestors in the faith we press for the direction of church today in light of the witness of scripture. Or, to turn that around, we hold out this question before the texts and allow them to ask us questions: How are we writing a vision for all to see? Are we pursuing God and welcoming him to our house? What do we do with our possessions? Have we made amends to those we have cheated? What should we lament? What do we endure? Do we have good resolve and good works that we pray will come to fruition? Not all of these foci will be preached this day but they are all ways of speaking to what God expects of us. The church of Jesus Christ in this world. Now.

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