

Telling the Church's Story
Sermon by Dr. Leah Fowler
Reformation Sunday
October 29, 2017

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Matthew 22:34-40

Have you ever had the sense that the sun was following you? I remember when I was a child, riding home from school in the car with my mom on a sunny day. I would close my eyes, and red and black and pink shapes would dance on the screen of my eyelids while the sun's rays grabbed at me through the arms and leaves of the trees lining the road. It seemed the sun was following me, and I *liked* that feeling. It made me feel warm and safe, like I could hope for something that was to come even if I did not know what that might be.

The changing of seasons cast the sun further from my presence. Daylight savings time, as we will have next week, would jolt a little more sun into the late afternoon, but that is only temporary: soon that jolt of extra light would yield itself back to darkness.

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord." Jeremiah shared this prophecy to the Hebrew people, who had experienced invasion, exile, and the destruction of the Temple, which was the only place they believed was the center of worship for God. "The days are surely coming...when I will make a new covenant with my people...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."

From their darkness emerged a new relationship brokered with God. God promised to go with the people, writing God's law on their hearts so that it would follow them like the Sun grabs us through the arms and leaves of the

trees on a bright autumn afternoon. How would this covenant spring forth? The people would have to put God at their center of orbit. Jesus continued to interpret the laws written on our hearts as this: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

In the early half of the 16th century, the scientist Copernicus articulated his heliocentric theory: an understanding that the Earth and other planets orbit the Sun, rather than what was commonly understood to be the Sun circling the Earth. Although there had been Arab and Persian astronomers who had also argued this point, for Europe this discovery was both radical and threatening. The church banned Copernicus’ theory for a couple hundred years; not only did it contradict the ancient cosmology in scripture; it also called into question the idea that humans are at the center of the universe.

During the same century Copernicus made his discovery, a young monk in Germany was also bringing great change to Europe that would ripple far beyond. Martin Luther had been trained in law. But after one terrified night in a thunderstorm, Luther bargained with God for his safety by offering his life as a monk. An increasing conviction grew in Luther that several practices of the Roman Catholic church at the time were an offense to the gospel. Luther found in particular the act of selling indulgences, which were paper certificates that guaranteed the buyer fewer years in purgatory for themselves or their loved ones an insult to God’s grace as shown in Jesus, especially because these indulgences took hard-earned money of the poor, and cashed in their hopes to line the pockets of greedy political and church powerful. Martin Luther made it clear in the 95 theses he supposedly nailed to the church door in Wittenberg, copies of which quickly spread through Europe thanks to the new technology of the printing press, that “he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but **God’s wrath**.¹”

¹ This is the 45th line of Luther’s *95 Theses* (<http://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>)

Because their understandings of the gospel of Jesus Christ had been confused, Luther offered a re-centering of priorities. The church and its leadership would no longer be the center. Luther offered 5 solas, which in Latin means “only”, to help Christians re-center their faith:

1. **Sola Scriptura** (“Scripture alone”): The Bible alone is our highest authority.
2. **Sola Fide** (“faith alone”): We are saved through faith alone in Jesus Christ.
3. **Sola Gratia** (“grace alone”): We are saved by the grace of God alone.
4. **Solus Christus** (“Christ alone”): Jesus Christ alone is our Lord, Savior, and Ruler.
5. **Soli Deo Gloria** (“to the glory of God alone”): We live for the glory of God alone

Martin Luther’s ideas found ripe soil to grow in and beyond Germany, and it was not long before his ideas merged and evolved with the ideas of other reformers, such as John Calvin and John Knox-- who are considered fathers to the Presbyterian Church.

I want to be clear that Martin Luther’s ideas also had an African influence. The fourth century philosopher, St. Augustine, who was from a place in Northern Africa we now know as Algeria, provided the basis of Luther’s understanding of grace. Additionally, although many people do not realize this, just before his 95 Theses were written, Luther had been fascinated by the Ethiopian Church². He admired its flourishing outside the boundaries of the Roman Church. He was influenced by the fact that it practiced communion and read the scriptures in the local language of the people. The Ethiopian church’s allowance of marriage for its ordained clergy made a mark on Luther, and indeed later in his journey Luther-- who had been a

² David D. Daniels, “Honor the Reformation’s African Roots” in *USA Today: Commercial Appeal* Oct. 21, 2017. Daniels is Professor of World Christianity at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago.

monk-- married Katharina Von Bora, who was a nun who had runaway from the convent with the help of Luther, who had smuggled her and her sisters out of the convent in barrels.

I admire how much one person's ideas, fueled by an understanding of the Holy Spirit, can shape a larger story that changed the face of Europe and reaches Christians all over the world today. It was with good reason that I wanted to make a **BIG DEAL** out of the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Let's take that victory lap.

I have pride in the influence of the Protestant Reformers. I value the particularities of our peculiar Presbyterian perspectives on faith: we are fairly progressive, especially on the matter of women in ministry; we have made a global contribution to education through our missionary reach; and we have a strong sense of calling that is a response to God's love for us. Not to mention the fact that we know we are saved!

However, I want to be honest and also say that I *lament* the divisions in the church that were a direct result of the Protestant Reformation. The heresies of yesterday have become orthodoxies of today. The Roman Catholic Church outlawed indulgences a few years after Luther's 95 Theses, and today Catholics read the bible and practice the mass in their local languages. From where we stand today, it is hard to imagine that wars were fought over these differences-- and frankly, many political leaders took hold of Luther's ideas as a cover for the independence they wanted from Rome that was more about money than about ideas of salvation. Luther did not intend to split the church but that is exactly what happened as each reformer and each generation valued its particularities over and above our belonging to the body of Christ. If we keep splitting, will there be anything left of us?

It may seem, as we look at the state of Christian churches around this country and their steady decline in membership, that the Sun is no longer

following us. As one season of the church history shifts into another, we look towards a darkness that falls sooner than we thought would come.

But let me offer that darkness is not all bad. It is in darkness that our bodies are granted rest and renewal, readied for a new day. It is in darkness that exchanges of love are offered between two people. It is in the darkness of the womb that new life begins. It is in darkness that we notice the brightness of the other stars, and realize that we are just a speck in God's vast and spectacular universe. It is in darkness that God's Spirit began the first offerings of creation. And it is in darkness that we will once again be returned to God.

When we look at the arc of scripture, the truth that emerges is that at that moment when we do not have breath, we are filled with the breath of God. And there is no better place than the church to discover and practice that. It is here that people bring their stories of faith and doubt, of weakness and failure, and of hope. It is here that when we know of someone who is ill, and we show up-- to offer some food or comfort or prayer. It is here that when we know someone is hurting, we touch their foreheads with the sign of the cross and pray for their healing. It is here that we are sustained by living water and by bread and wine, so that we will not be hungry or thirsty when we do what Jesus asks of us. It is here that people come seeking membership, and they come from many traditions: Presbyterians, yes, but also Roman Catholic and Episcopalian and Pentecostal and Buddhist. People come from this country yes but also from South Korea and Japan, Ecuador, India and Malawi, China, Madagascar and Cuba. I believe in total it is at least 15 countries we represent. It is here that the broken body of Christ gets put back together and then leaves again to bring healing into a world that is broken too.

It is here we learn the story of what it means to love God, and love neighbor. And once these are written on our hearts, they go with us everywhere, following us like the Sun on a clear autumn day, reaching

through the arms and leaves of the trees to grab us. This story also covers us in darkness, restoring and transforming us so that we can rise with the dawn and the possibilities that come with it..

May this story be written on each of our hearts, even as God is still writing it with and through us. Amen.