

Mark 13:5-11 *Jesus said to them: “Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁶ Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. ⁷ When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁸ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. ⁹ “You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. ¹⁰ And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. ¹¹ Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.*

500 years later, here we still stand

1. Stand for the truth
2. Keep focused on our mission
3. Embrace the cross

We have labeled October 31st “Reformation Day” because on this date in 1517, Dr. Martin Luther posted 95 theses for debate on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany. That event sparked a movement that brought about the Lutheran Reformation. But as important as that was, 500 years ago this year was an even more important event in the life of Luther. By this time, Luther had already been declared a heretic by the Roman Pope. He was summoned to the Diet of Worms – no, its not that. A diet is a meeting of the princes of the Holy Roman Empire. In 1521, they met in the city of Worms, Germany, to conduct state business. One of the items of business was Luther. He was summoned to appear before Emperor Charles V where he was to recant his writings. If he did not, he could face the same fate as Jon Hus a century before, that is, being burned at the stake.

Instead of recanting, Luther said this: “Since your royal majesty and your grace desire a simple answer, I shall give you one without horns or teeth: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Holy Scripture or with clearly illuminated reason – for I believe neither pope nor council alone, since it is clear that they have often erred and contradicted each other – I am held by the power of the passages of Scripture I have quoted. My conscience is held captive by the Word of God. I can retract nothing, nor do I desire to do so, because it is not safe but dangerous to act against conscience. I cannot do anything else. Here I stand. God help me. Amen.” (August Graebner, The Life of Dr. Martin Luther, 1483-1546, pp. 231-232)

500 years ago that’s where Luther stood. 500 years later, here we still stand. In the legacy of Martin Luther, we still stand for the truth. Jesus warned, *“Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁶ Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many.”* Deception is the theme of the end times. The closing years of this world will be hard times for sorting out truth and lies. People will be confused. Clarity will turn cloudy. Good will look wrong. Wrong will appear acceptable. Jesus gives us a “red alert” warning us to know our Bibles well. Only when we have a thorough knowledge of God’s Word can we sort through the falsehood.

Jesus warned about many claiming, “I am he,” deceiving many. When Luther was alive one person claimed to be sent straight from Jesus Christ and represent Jesus’ every thought and wish. That was Pope Leo X. The pope claimed the ability to free people from the punishments of hell and purgatory through the sale of indulgences. He claimed to have sole authority over whatever is called truth. He took the title, “Vicar of Christ,” claiming to be standing in God’s place on earth. This clearly is the deception of “I am he” and the worst part of the deception is that it led people away from faith in Christ to their own efforts and works.

As you heard Luther’s statement at Worms, he was held captive by the Word of God. Through his studies as a Professor, Luther learned that the church had made claims and doctrinal stands that contradicted each other and Scripture. It became clear to him that the only thing that was true was God’s Word, the Bible. And so, a motto of the Reformation came to be: Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura – By grace alone, through faith alone, on the basis of Scripture alone. We are saved by God’s grace – God’s undeserved love – and not by anything that we do. We receive the salvation of Jesus Christ by faith in our Savior alone. We believe that based on Scripture alone – not what the church says or the pastor says, but what God’s Word says.

What does it mean to you to be called Lutheran? To some, being Lutheran means little more than an accident of birth. They are Lutheran only because their parents were Lutheran. To some, being Lutheran means standing and

sitting a lot in church. To some, being Lutheran means nothing, just a name they hold on to for reasons of tradition. Being Lutheran means something. It means more than tradition or heritage. Early Lutherans allowed that name to stick because that meant they believed the same thing as Luther. They believed in salvation by God's grace alone through faith alone. It means that our conscience is held captive by the word of God and we cannot, we will not, teach or believe anything that conflicts with the word of God. Lutheran Christians are also evangelical, that is, we want to proclaim the gospel for the salvation of souls because the time is short.

When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁸ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. When you drive down the road you see all kinds of signs. Some signs are green, giving information like miles to the next city. Some signs are red and tell you what you have to do: stop or yield. Other signs are yellow, warning you about road conditions or hazards. Jesus is giving us signs here. These are not "green signs" that tell us information about when he is going to return. If we read these signs that way, we miss the point. These are "yellow signs" giving us a warning. Every time we hear of wars, earthquakes, famines and things like that, take warning. Be ready. These are the birth pains announcing his coming could be at any time.

By the time that generation of the apostles died, all these things had happened. The apostles were put on trial before governors and kings. A famine and persecution had caused the Apostle Paul to raise a collection for the believers in Jerusalem. The temple was destroyed by the Roman army in 70 A. D. Many false writings appeared that claimed to come from Paul, Barnabas and others, but weren't. And the gospel had spread through the known world of the time. But the end didn't come.

Why not? Jesus called them the *beginning of birth pains*. Any woman who has had a child knows what he is talking about. The contractions aren't as strong at the beginning of labor, but you know they will get stronger. And once they start, you can't stop them. That's what Jesus is telling us here. It's bad and it's only going to get worse. And there is no stopping these things.

We live in a world that has been corrupted with sin. As the world goes on, the corruption will go deeper and deeper, like rust on your old car. Jesus says "Watch out," but don't be surprised. These are necessary birth pains. These are necessary to accomplish his purpose, the salvation of his people.

God's goal for us is not this corrupt, decaying world. We have a hard time letting go of this world though, don't we? We like to hold on to the family, the fun, the house, the things. With every persecution and every problem, God is prying our grip off of this world one finger at a time. This corrupted, sinful world is not our home. God has prepared something better for us. He sacrificed his own Son to rescue us from our sin and this sinful world. The Son of God left the perfect state of heaven and endured this corrupt world for you and me. He died so that we could live. He rose again to give us the promise of life. He ascended to prepare a place for us. Let us repent of our too firm a grip on this and look forward in faith to that.

What does it mean to you to be called Lutheran? Being Lutheran means confessing that truth. Lutheran Christians are also evangelical, that is, we want to proclaim the gospel for the salvation of souls. And being Lutheran means we embrace the cross.

"You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. ¹⁰ And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Luther said, "If the Gospel should be stirred up and be heard again, without doubt the whole world would be aroused and moved, and the greater portion of the kings, princes, bishops, doctors and clergy, and all that is great, would oppose it and rage against it, as has always happened when the Word of God has come to light; for the world cannot endure that comes from God. This is proved in Christ, who was and is the very greatest and most precious and best of all that God has; yet the world not only did not receive him, but persecuted him more cruelly than all others who had ever come forth from God." (Works of Martin Luther, Vol. 1, p. 283)

What Jesus said has come true. But Jesus also said not to be alarmed. He has all this under control. Jesus allows his Church to be persecuted and attacked in order to give us opportunities to share the good news of Jesus. And that's what we do. That's what it means to be Lutheran. We make use of the opportunities we have to share Jesus with the world, because it's all about Jesus. Luther translated the Bible, wrote and confessed in order to get the Word of God to people. So, we also preach and teach, we do outreach and support missions. And if that brings hardships on us, we embrace that as the dear cross.

That's where Luther stood 500 years ago. 500 years later, here we still stand.