

Reformation Sunday – October 29, 2017 Shepherd by the Sea, Gualala, CA.

Pastor Sharon Lubkeman

Thank you for the privilege of being with you today as we celebrate with the whole church the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. We have come a long way since Luther's battle with the Catholic Church he so wanted to reform. How far? My experience, two weeks ago I had been invited by Father Tom to participate in the marriage service for my Granddaughter Allyssa and her Ryan at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Mentor, Ohio. She had let him know her Grandmother was a Rev. so he insisted I participate. A women, a Lutheran! It was such a joy to give the final blessing on their marriage. We grandmothers were even ask to bring forward the elements for open Holy Communion which the bride and groom distributed. We have come a long way with much to celebrate today with our ecumenical partners in ministry.

We began our worship singing Luther's hymn 'A Mighty fortress is our God.' Based on Ps. 46 we are reminded of what it means that our most Gracious God is our fortress—"our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble."

Might this be what sets us free? In the Gospel text from John, Jesus says: if you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." This Word, God's love story from beginning to end, is all about a Gracious God wanting to be in relationship with us. Wanting to be our fortress, our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble. Believing that, trusting that, is this what will set us free?"

Think of the new found freedom and joy Luther must have experienced when discovering in God's word that he was saved from sin by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ. He no longer had to work so hard to merit God's love and we know how hard he did work at it. In God's word he found the Gracious God he had been searching for. In his renewed relationship with God he discovered his fortress, his refuge and strength. What freedom was now his!!

In the past few months we have heard much about the need for a fortress, a place of refuge, a shelter. News reports told us that 30,000 people found refuge during Hurricane Harvey. At least 20,000 people were evacuated from the fires in Northern California to 21 shelters just in Sonoma County. 1100 Red Cross workers were providing shelter, food, and comfort for thousands of people during the Napa Valley fires.

But then there were those who did not seek shelter who suffered the consequences of their decision. We watched as newsmen were pummeled by rain and wind trying to convey to all who watched just how bad the situation was. I found myself shouting at the TV, "get out of the rain-find the shelter that is there for you!"

There are times we are like that-standing in the midst of all kinds of dangers, forgetting the truth that God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble-ready to set us free from the anxieties that surround us. In our doubting time, we wonder how it is possible that God can be in the midst of hurt, confusion, tension, and frustration. David Lose asks: "Where would we think that God could not be present? In crowded cities? In our busyness? In our loneliness? In our

heartaches and struggles? In our enemies? In our frustrations and self-doubts? During those times we struggle simply to survive? God is present there as well.” In those times and places we can pause and believe that God is breathing strength and goodness into our spirits. We can then approach our lives with new freedom, hope and courage. We are NEVER alone! As my friend Ted Peters says, “Being aware of Christ abiding presence can become the most comforting and inspiring gift of God’s grace.” This truth will set us free, free then to provide hands on love and shelter to others. As tragic as the events have been we have witnessed lately, the response of caring people have been a testimony to how it is God turns the worst situation into something good.

Luther now realized his sin was even greater than he first thought. ‘Sin, he said, is not trusting in God, not trusting that the one who has set us free from sin, guilt and death, is always present to us. We are sinners yet forgiven sinners through the life and death of Jesus Christ. We made that confession earlier, we all have sinned and fallen short and we cannot free ourselves. We are freed to love and serve others. With that realization Luther went about the task of translating the Bible to get God’s word into the hands of the laity so they might discover God’s truth about grace and the promise to be their refuge, a very present help in trouble.

If we are honest we are all guilty at times of not trusting God. Our anxiety is proof of that. We are so good at it-especially in those early morning hours-called “stinking thinking time”. We can know God is our refuge but we find it hard to let go of our fears and anxieties and take shelter God’s presence.

The story is told of old Mary, walking down the road carrying a huge bundle on her back. Farmer Jones comes along with his wagon and invites Mary to come on board. A few miles down the road he turns to see Mary still holding the bundle on her back. Mary, he says, put your burden down. He replies: it is enough that you carry me, you don’t need to carry my burden as well. Sounds silly, yet how often we do the same. God’s invitation is to put down our burdens, our anxieties, our hurts, and grief and let our Gracious God carry both us and them.

In my devotions this week I found these words written as if from God: “Remember I am present with you whether you sense My presence or not. Then start talking with me about whatever is on your mind. Rejoice in the fact that I understand you perfectly and I know exactly what you are experiencing.”

May we all be renewed on this Reformation Sunday by these truths that set us free: we are sinners, forgiven sinners. God’s love and grace are very present to us every day. God is indeed our refuge and our strength!

Thanks be to God for this good news and Martin Luther who discovered the true meaning of God’s grace and worked to reform the church, and for your work here at Shepherd of the Sea as you continue the reforming work of the church in all your ministry. Amen.