

The Festival of the Reformation • October 26, 2008

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

John 8:31-36

“Back to Basics – What is God’s Word?”

This weekend in our worship services, we Lutheran Christians observe Reformation Day as a day of celebration, commemorating the return of the gospel to the church. So, in honor of this festival day, consider something decidedly *not* of the sixteenth century: video games! My brother and I played video games growing up, starting way back with the now-ancient Magnavox Odyssey², one of the very first home video game consoles. As the technology advanced, we moved on to the Nintendo Entertainment System (or NES), the Super NES, and the generations of video game consoles that followed. In fact, I still play some video games for fun today. But all the games – whether they’re *Pong*, where you’d see two panels moving up and down opposite sides of the screen in a bare-bones game of table tennis, or *Super Mario Bros.*, the successor to *Donkey Kong* that follows the adventures of the legendary Italian plumber Mario as he stomps on turtle-monsters and plunges down pipes in the search for the Princess (who more often than not is absent from the castle you’ve been searching!) – all the games tell stories. Many of the most successful video game franchises are those that feature a really compelling story, something that draws the player into the world of the game. The well-developed story in these games invites the gamer into an experience that goes beyond graphical horsepower and technical wizardry, giving players something more substantial than repetitive jump-and-shoot gameplay. These days, a game’s story might involve escaping from a house where hordes of undead zombies have taken up residence, developing and nurturing a simulated organism, or saving all life in the galaxy from annihilation. The story can be central to the game.

Today, as we celebrate the Festival of the Reformation and come to the conclusion of our *Back to Basics* sermon series, exploring the fundamental topic of “What is God’s Word?” we find that story is central there, as well. We observe Reformation Sunday on the last Sunday of October each year. On October 31, 1517, something very significant happened in the life of the Church: Martin Luther posted ninety-five points for theological discussion to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. In effect, the 95 Theses served as a call to consider the central story of Scripture, what it was and how that story played out in the lives of people in Germany and even in the lives of people throughout the world today. This is one of the concepts that we teach as part of our Confirmation course for our young people here at St. John’s. We also hope to impart an understanding of the principal message of God’s Word. **The central story of Scripture is God’s breaking in to history in specific ways to bring about salvation for His people, which ultimately takes place in the person and work of His Son, Jesus the Messiah.**

As we come to our Gospel reading today from John 8, this story is proclaimed yet again. When Jesus starts talking about freedom, we might have a reaction similar to that of the Jews to whom he was speaking: “Freedom? What freedom do *we* need? We’re Americans and have never been slaves to anyone!” The message that Jesus announced is the same one that I bring you today. Anyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. It doesn’t matter what the sin is: whenever we try to set ourselves or something else up as a god in God’s place, determining right and wrong in our own eyes, we turn away from God. We sin by doing something as seemingly innocuous as gossiping just as much as if we’re committing Grand Theft Auto. And in sinning, we are turning our backs on the God who loves us and running back into slavery and captivity to sin. We’re effectively putting the devil’s chains back around our own wrists and ankles! But the message that Jesus brought to those people and to us is not just one of sobering reality; rather, it is full of real promise. Jesus delivered

the good news that we are *set free*. We're not just getting an "extra life" in some far-off future existence. God Himself, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, through his cross and his empty tomb, frees *you* from slavery to sin and death. He liberates you, taking off the chains that bound you and releasing you for service as His own adopted child. The Son, the Word of God, sets us free.

So why did God's Word play such a central role in the Reformation? In the 95 Theses and other writings, Luther and the other Reformers pointed out that some significant points of the church's instruction were in opposition to what God's Word taught. Over time, the church had drifted from reliance on Jesus as Savior, moving instead to a dependence on man's own good works for salvation. Throughout our *Back to Basics* series this fall, we've seen that Scripture teaches that our efforts, however good they might seem, are never enough to bring us back into a restored relationship with God. They can't free us from slavery to sin. Only the Son may set us free – that's the message that God's Word makes known, the message that Luther embraced. The Son of God came down to earth to set us free, purely out of His own goodness and love. The Reformers sought to cast off the errors and abuses that had been allowed to build up over time. They argued that teachings that said you must earn salvation through works or that you could pay for the forgiveness of sin through gold and silver had no place in the Church. They promoted a return to that central story of God's Word.

In order to help teach the people the freeing truth of the gospel, Luther designed a seal which is depicted on the front cover of our worship bulletin this weekend. [This same graphic of Luther's Seal may be found on the pages of our website.] At its center, you'll find a black cross, reminding us that Jesus died to take the punishment for our sins. Surrounding the cross is a heart which represents God's love for us, red with the blood of Christ. The white rose speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, calling us to holy living and continually drawing us into a closer walk with Christ. Beyond the rose, we see the sky-blue background which calls to mind the joy of the new life that God gives us as His freed people. Ultimately, we look ahead to the promise of eternal life with God as those who have been baptized into Christ, illustrated in the golden ring that frames the seal. In this particular image, you'll also find six words in that ring. They are the three *sola's* of the Lutheran Reformation: "Grace Alone," "Faith Alone," and "Word Alone." Only through God's love for us in Jesus, His *grace alone* – or, as Pastor Meehan noted in a sermon several weeks ago, God's Riches At Christ's Expense – are we set free from slavery to sin and death. By *faith alone*, faith which God puts into our hearts and minds by the work of His Spirit, do we receive the benefits of grace. Our works, again, do not save us. And God calls us to know Him through His *Word alone*. Though the world around us may continually be changing, God guides us through His unchanging Word. And yet, by the work of the Spirit, every time a Christian spends time in Scripture, it may be a fresh reading where one learns something new and directly relevant to living life today, calling us anew through the sweet song of the gospel. We believe that the Bible is God's inerrant and inspired Word, but God's Word is even bigger than this library of sixty-six books. The Word existed before the Bible was written down, for God the Son is in the Word, even since the creation of all things. God's Word is living and active *for you*.

We celebrate the central story of God's Word in Scripture this Reformation Sunday as we gather around the altar. In the Lord's Supper, God breaks in to history to deliver salvation *to you* through Christ's own body and blood. Here, Jesus sets you free from slavery to sin and death anew. Because if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Amen.