

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Our reading from Jeremiah is addressed to a people who are exiled from their home, left with no hope, the covenant between them and God seemingly broken. Jeremiah speaks to them, words of hope, words of promise, the promise of a new covenant, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord," and the new covenant will be evidence of God's overwhelming love and grace. And this is a fitting start to a day that we celebrate Martin Luther's rediscovery of a treasure that the church of his day had forgotten. This rediscovery? God's grace, abundant grace in the new covenant established by God in and through our Lord Jesus. Reformation Day celebrates Luther's restoration of a right understanding of that covenant. Luther knew that God's nature, his love, mercy and forgiveness for his wayward people does not waver.

Now imagine a weight so burdensome that you not only cannot carry it, but you cannot even bear it, weight that crushes the life out of you even as you struggle with it. Imagine going through life with a weight like that. This is the kind of life you would have lived had you been around in Luther's time. The weight of sin, the promise of the torment of purgatory for you and your loved ones unless you could buy your way out, or buy a relative out, the threat of something even worse if you could not. Imagine penance that could literally break you and take whatever you had accumulated through your life. Being told that you could not measure up to God's standards, knowing that you cannot save yourself by your own efforts, but told to try anyway.

Not only was that life back then, but it was Martin Luther's life as well, as a student, as a monk. Nothing of grace, nothing of the love of God, nothing but trying to live up to standards you could not reach. A weight so burdensome, a life of torment, this was Luther's early life, even as an Augustinian friar, as a priest, as a professor of OT at the university in Wittenberg. No matter that he was a Hebrew scholar and fair in Greek, it was all for naught.

But then came a rediscovery of something that had been well known in the early church, but was largely forgotten by the Roman church of which he was part. Through the study of scripture, he realized that we are saved by grace through faith, not by works, not by keeping the law, not by buying indulgences or through penance or trying to earn God's favor through works of restitution. From Romans "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe."

From his efforts to reform the church came a split with the Roman church, a new denomination that bore his name, even against his wishes. Luther later wrote something that seems paradoxical, contradictory. He wrote: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none." In addition: "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Now this has a direct bearing on you and I this morning.

Jesus tells us this morning: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." So what is truth? It is literally a body of truth, our Lord Jesus. The truth is Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord. And we know that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word is Jesus, and scripture is the Word written down, and the words that Jesus said. Jesus identifies himself as the "Way and the Truth and the Life." Jesus tells us that if we continue in his word we are his disciples, in other words, we walk in the way, which is Jesus, he is the truth, and in him we have life, a life of freedom. Not freedom to anything we want to do, but freedom to do as we ought to do, to walk in the marks of discipleship. We have spiritual freedom, we are no longer held down by a weight so burdensome, the weight of sin. We are still sinners, but it means that we are not in bondage to sin, not because of our own efforts but because of Jesus.

The Son has made us free, free to serve God, to serve our neighbors, free from the weight of hoarding our possessions, scheming for power and authority over our brothers and sisters, free to serve God, to serve our neighbor, to do both in love, through love. We are free to live an abundant life as disciples serving God not out of fear of purgatory or worse, but because we are loved and we respond in the same way. My friends, we are free, really free! AMEN