

So now what?

By Elizabeth A. Eaton



This month marks the 501st anniversary of the Reformation. Last year it was all Reformation all the time. It was our year!

News, media and the public paid attention. Hundreds of Reformation-themed events took place. Documentaries were produced and joyful liturgies

were held. I have lost track of the number of “Flat Luther” photos that were taken. We walked with a spring in our step. We read Martin Luther’s Small Catechism together. Even Lutherans in parts of the U.S. where Lutherans are not dense were noticed!

But the spotlight has dimmed, the public and the media have turned their eye to other things. Reformation 500 swag has taken up residence in the backs of closets and the bottoms of file drawers. And, I’d wager, our Small Catechisms sit alone and unopened on shelves and apps. This really is Oct. 32.

But, dear church, now is the time for us to refocus our attention on the gospel of our freedom, forgiveness and reconciliation given to us through God’s indescribable act of love in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Take out your Small Catechism and take a fresh look at Luther’s clear and concise exposition of the faith.

To start, turn to Luther’s explanation of the second article of the Apostles’ Creed. In beautifully spare language, he lays out the truth about God and human nature: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord.”

Two things jump out—the God of all creation, infinite and omnipotent, set aside all of that to become finite and helpless as the Christ child and the broken one on the cross, and this Jesus is Lord. There are many things that claim our attention and allegiance, but none of these can save us and none of these is Lord.


Luther continues: “He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being.” He had a conservative and realistic assessment of humankind. Yes, we affirm with the psalmist that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14), but it is also clear that we are seriously and terminally broken. We are a rebellious lot constantly rising up against God’s good and gracious will and trying to set ourselves up as savior. This never ends well. And while there is pain in acknowledging that we are sinful, there is also freedom in confessing that truth.

Here’s the thing: we have to get past a kind of Billy Joel theology in which God sings “I Like You Just the Way You Are” to the realization that God does not like us just the way we are and in infinite love has done something about it. In Christ, Luther wrote, God has “purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.”

Here is pure grace. It is God’s action, not ours. We don’t have to—in fact, we cannot—do anything to save ourselves or the world. God has done it.

So now what? So now we live, really live, in freedom and in service. Luther wrote: “He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally.”

This is what the world needs to see in us and hear from us—not a vindictive, capricious god who must be appeased, nor a purveyor of therapeutic moralism, but an all-powerful God who comes to us in humble human form to set us free from our murderous rebellion so we may be whole, holy and wholly devoted to joyful service.

This is most certainly true. 

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

This column originally appeared in *Living Lutheran’s* October 2018 issue. Reprinted with permission.