

Reformation Day 2021/Oct. 31

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Happy Halloween!

You thought I was going to say Happy Reformation day, right?

But, today is Halloween. Today all the little kids will be roaming around the neighborhoods collecting candy. It's a fun tradition, right?

In Buffalo WY, the street the church is located on was famous for being the scary street in town that everyone came to trick or treat at.

One of the members of the church who lived two doors down had an elaborately decorated house. They loved to scare the kids as much as possible. They would jump out of bushes and have scary things all over the yard.

The little ones would quiver at the sight of their house and the middle schoolers would try to be cool as they approached the candy dish only to find themselves screaming when Chuck jumped out with a fake hatchet.

It's always fascinated me how much people like to be scared. I don't like it. I was scarred by Poltergeist in the 80s and have chosen to not watch another horror movie again. Although I did get stuck in Get Out without realizing it was a horror movie. Who puts out a horror movie at Christmas time?

Oh well. Horror movies are big business, I guess any time of year.

My friend Denise really loves horror movies and that surprised me, because I just didn't think that matched her personality. She's bright and cheery.

When I asked her in a surprised tone, "Really? Why?" She answered that at the end of a horror movie you leave the theater and you know that it's not real. There is really nothing to be afraid of. It's all made up.

That was one of those "huh" moments for me. Huh. That's a good point.

And that kind of reminded me of what happened with the Reformation.

The peasants who lived in what is now Germany were living in a horrible time – plague, war, extreme poverty – much worse than COVID. It was bad. On top of it all, the Pope was sending around Passion plays to scare the Germans into believing that if they didn't buy indulgences, they would be tortured in purgatory until their sin was burned off of them.

When you're already living a nightmare, the last thing you want to do is die and suffer in an even worse condition, so the idea that you could buy your way into heaven was really appealing, and that is what funded the construction of the Vatican.

Luther was among those Germans who were living in a nightmare.

Every day of his life up until 1513, he was born in 1483, so he was 30 years old, he was distraught with fear; he was enslaved by sin.

Every waking moment he worried about going to hell or getting stuck in purgatory. And then he read Romans for himself, and it was like being let free from a dark movie theater. He walked into the light and realized it was all fake – all of the scary stuff about hell and purgatory was fake.

And you know what happens when you realize that all of the scary stuff is fake? You laugh and life become full of joy, and in joy, you stop worrying about yourself and you start loving others.

God is in control and God loves us eternally. That gift of good news sets us free from sin and fear, so that we can look at scary situations and proclaim, as Luther did, "Never the less, I am baptized!" Never the less, I am baptized. So bring it satan. I have nothing to fear!

So, in April of 1521, when Luther was brought before the Emperor in the city of Worms to recant all of his works, or basically get killed, Luther said –

*Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures and by clear reason (for I do not trust in the pope or councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.*

Even in front of the emperor and the threat of death, Luther wouldn't let fear hold him captive. He knew he was set free by Christ, so why would he allow anyone to hold him captive? With the Holy Spirit, there is nothing to fear, not sin nor death.

And it's interesting that Luther's declaration of not being afraid of death, because God has set him free, was proclaimed in the city of Worms.

On this Halloween/Reformation Day, I just can't help but think of the Hearse song – "The worms crawl in. The worms crawl out. The worms play pinochle on your snout. They eat your eyes. They eat your nose. They eat the jelly between your toes."

My mom absolutely hates that song. She gets mad at me when I sing it, but it makes me laugh, and laughing in the face of death is a good thing. As Luther said, laughter chases the devil away.

And through Jesus' death and resurrection, we are able to laugh at the fear or death as we proclaim that we are saved by grace through faith. God is faithful and righteous and has set us free from all fear, because we are dearly beloved children.

And so today, on your way out the door, be sure to grab your diet of worms off the back table as we laugh in the face of death on this Halloween/All Saints day eve.

As it says in our prayer in the Baptismal Rite – Sustain you children with the gift of your Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the awe of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Spirit enables us with wisdom and joy to laugh in the face of death and at all that would scare us. So, have fun today.

And if you are wondering why Reformation Day falls on the day before All Saints Day, it's because Luther knew everyone would be going to worship the next day, it was a day of obligation. You were required to go or you would be tacking thousands of years onto your purgatory sentence, making it the perfect day to start thinking about indulgences.

So, on the night before All Saints he tacked up his 95 theses to the church door knowing that everyone would see them on their way in. Not everyone would be able to read them, but the other scholars who read Latin would and he wanted to be sure that they knew he wanted to talk about indulgences, and basically purgatory.

It was that scholarly practice that set off the Reformation, which is really a misnomer. Luther wasn't trying to reform anything, he was trying to get the church back to being Biblical.

Indulgences are clearly not in the Bible. Jesus gives us salvation for free, because we are beloved, not because of anything we do or do not do.

This is something we often forget, so for Lutherans we remember Reformation Day every year to remind ourselves to check our theology. Are we putting up barriers? Are we trying to scare anyone with the threat of hell or shame? If we are, then we need to repent and change our ways.

Today we remember how at the end of every horror movie, we always leave alive, fully intact, although maybe with some nightmares, but we know it's not real.

All of that super scary stuff is our imagination, not God's. God makes fluffy bunnies, and kitten whiskers, and families, and love. We are the ones who turn gifts into curses. That's on us. And when we realize that sin is our own making, God erases it and sets us free.

The Son makes us free, through his death and resurrection, and we are free indeed.

God takes the worst and transforms it into life.

So, on this Halloween/Reformation day, may we celebrate with laughter and joy as the little goblins come trick or treating for candy. We'll gladly give them our sweets as we remember that demons have absolutely no hold over us.

Whereas demons greedily take what they can get, we gladly give them what has first been given us, the sweetest thing of all, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

Nothing destroys a demon like Jesus, God's love personified, the keeper of the key who sets us all free.

Thanks be to God. Amen.