

Feast or Famine

In the name of him whose truth sets us free indeed, dear friends in Christ: Today we mark the 499th anniversary of the Reformation of the Church in Western Europe. It began (at least on the human side) more or less by accident. It happened when a lone Augustinian friar and university professor in Saxony posted a number of theological theses that he was willing to debate with anyone who cared to defend the relatively new innovation that had been foisted upon the Church by greedy and corrupt men: namely, the sale of indulgences. According to them you could with your cold hard cash buy God's forgiveness and eternal salvation not only for yourself, but also for deceased loved ones who were supposedly paying the temporal consequences of their sins by suffering immensely in a mythical place called Purgatory – another of their fanciful inventions. The friar, Martin Luther, hoped for a discussion that would expose the errors being taught and set things in the Church back on the proper course and the simple truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What he got instead was firestorm of indignant fury. "How dare you question what we're doing? We are the Church founded by Christ. We have been invested by him with all authority. Therefore if we're doing it, it must be right. So sit down, shut up, and accept it; or suffer the consequences" – which in that day meant being tortured until you begged for mercy and then being then burned at the stake.

The Church of Luther's day was in desperate need of reformation, the crass sale of indulgences being only one of many errors that had been allowed to creep into its teachings over time. But it's hardly the first time in history it happened. Indeed, any honest reading of Scripture shows that the periods when the people of God are being taught correctly and they are living in faithfulness to the Word are comparatively few and far between. From the time when Samuel was a boy and "the Word of the Lord was rare" and the high priesthood was totally corrupt, to the time when Josiah was king and cleaning out the temple one day they accidentally rediscovered the Holy Scriptures that had been lost and forgotten for a generation, to the time of Jesus when the religious leaders were so spiritually blind and misguided that they didn't recognize in him the fulfillment of all they were supposedly hoping for – what the record shows is that the Church is pretty much in constant need of reformation. And the text I've chosen as the basis of this message goes a long way to explain why.

It's from the prophecy of Amos, chapter 8, verses 11 and 12, where we read: "Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord GOD, "when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. ¹² They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it."

We humans need certain things to survive. You can live only 3 or 4 minutes without air. Without warmth, say if you fell into the ocean in the North Atlantic or broke through the ice on a pond and couldn't get out, you'd be lucky to last 20 minutes; probably less. Depending on weather and temperature, lack of water will kill you in somewhere between 1 and 4 days. And without food, who knows? Some of us have greater reserves to draw on. I've heard of people lasting up to 60 days or more. But I also recall Jesus saying, "Man does not live on bread alone, but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God." To draw the logical corollary, those who are without God's Word are dead even while they live.

In his dealings with ancient Israel, we are quite accustomed to seeing the Lord use various forms of hardship to discipline his people when they went astray. He'd withhold his hand of blessing to allow an enemy to invade and take the people's much labored over harvest, or he'd send a drought or a blight to ruin the crops. He'd cause his people to hunger and thirst in their bodies that they might see that their greater need was for him, the God they'd turned their backs on. The goal was always to bring them to repentance and back to himself. And very often that would do the trick.

But not always. There were other times when no matter what the Lord did or threatened to do, his people refused to listen to his Word through the prophets calling them to repent. So it was in the time of Amos. He'd been sent by God to the northern kingdom of Israel. What they had done there was to set up a couple of unauthorized alternate worship sites. The kings of the ten tribes of northern Israel didn't want their subjects going to the Lord's temple in Jerusalem to perform their religious obligations. They wanted to keep it all in house, so to speak, fearing that if their subjects owed their religious allegiance to Jerusalem, they might shift their political loyalty there as well, to the reigning king of the house of David. They didn't want that.

So, these two alternate worship sites were set up to mimic the temple in Jerusalem. The people were told, "You don't need to go all the way to Jerusalem to worship the Lord; we've got a nice temple right here within the borders of our own country. Worship the Lord and offer your sacrifices here." And most of the people were agreeable. It was a lot more convenient, after all. But that was only the first change. You see, because they didn't have the one original Ark of the Covenant (which was the locus of God's gracious presence on earth) to put in their Holy of Holies, they made two golden calves to represent the Lord instead. I guess they remembered something about the Israelites once making an idol of him in the shape of a calf. But apparently they forgot how that story turned out.

Things went downhill from there. Still claiming to be faithfully worshipping the Lord and properly adhering to the Scriptures, they introduced all kinds of pagan teachings and practices into their religion. And when the Lord would send them a prophet like Amos to tell them that what they were doing was completely wrong and unacceptable, they'd respond exactly like the authorities in the Church responded to Luther – with indignant fury. "Who are you to question our way of doing things? We are faithful to the Lord. You're the one who's messed up. Go back where you came from or we'll kill you."

Through Amos and other prophets the Lord tried and again to get the people of Israel to listen; but they stubbornly refused. And so, in the end, the Lord replied with the words of the text, saying essentially, "Fine, have it your way. Since you won't listen to what I say, I'm going to stop speaking to you. You'll search everywhere, looking high and low for a Word from me, but I'm done talking to you."

There can be nothing more terrifying for the Lord to say to someone. When he whose Words are life in time and eternity stops speaking, the day of grace is over. All that remains is destruction and death. And that's precisely what happened to the northern kingdom of Israel. Wiped out. Gone. Erased. And worse, most of its inhabitants eternally condemned to hell.

But these things are written for our benefit, that we may believe – and take the warning to heart. When someone consistently refuses to hear what the Lord says, eventually the Lord stops speaking. I think of Jesus in his trial before King Herod – the man who rebuffed the Baptizer's call for him to repent and later had him killed. Jesus, the Lord of life, had nothing to say to him. He refused to cast his pearls before a swine.

And it's accurate to say that in Luther's time there was a famine of God's Word. Oh, not a complete famine. The Word of the Lord was there, but it was almost impossible to hear. First because when you went to a church service, the Scripture readings would all be in Latin – which most lay people didn't understand. There might be a choir of monks or nuns chanting a psalm or parts of the liturgy, but that would be in Latin too. There were no Bibles for people to read, nor was there any congregational hymn singing. And the priest when he consecrated the elements for Holy Communion would do so in a low whisper precisely so that he could not be heard by the congregation. The thinking was that the mystery was too great and holy for the unwashed masses to hear. Now, we know that faith comes by hearing the Word of God. So where did that leave most people? In the dark.

And that's only the half of it. The other reason it was nearly impossible to hear God's Word was because of all the religious sounding gobbledygook that had crept into the church's teaching which obscured and often negated the Gospel of Jesus Christ by which we are saved. In the church's sermons and other teaching – which *were* in the language of the people – instead of hearing about the life and ministry of Jesus, and how he gave his life as the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world, you'd hear about Jesus the judge who was still pretty angry about that whole crucifixion thing. He was coming to get even, so you'd better clean up your act and make amends. And they'd tell you how to do that: by taking pilgrimages to sacred sites, by performing acts of penance, by fasting and long hours spent in prayer, by taking oaths of poverty and celibacy and joining a convent or monastery, by venerating the relics and remains of various saints, and yes, by buying an indulgence. And because you couldn't deal with Jesus directly because he was so mad at you, you'd be encouraged to try to influence him in your favor through the intercession of his mother or one of the saints that he was more kindly disposed to. People were taught to seek the mercy and assistance of the saints rather than the mercy and forgiveness of God through Jesus. In short, the church's teaching on salvation had far more to do with what you must do to save yourself rather than what Jesus has already done to save you and to grant you eternal life.

Luther found himself starving in the midst of this famine. A loyal son of the church, he believed what he'd been taught. And he was obsessed with trying to win the favor of God through all the avenues of self atonement it presented. They always came up short. They always left him feeling he hadn't done enough or done it well enough. The more he ate of these spiritually empty calories, the hungrier he became.

And then, nearing despair, he discovered the feast that was there in God's Word all along: the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ – not a righteousness that had to be earned by holy living, but that was achieved by Jesus through his passion, bloodshed, and death, and that is freely given to those who trust in him. Searching the Scriptures Luther found it again and again. All the Law and prophets testify to it. He discovered that the feast of salvation through faith in Jesus is sitting there on every page of the Bible.

My friends, we are blessed to be the spiritual heirs of Luther's rediscovery of the life-giving feast that overflows everywhere from the Word of God. Therefore it's right that we commemorate the events of the Reformation, and even more that we give humble thanks to the Lord for restoring and preserving his saving truth in our midst. And while we give thanks, let's also heed the warning of today's text. Those who fail to appreciate and feed consistently from the feast we have before us can lose it – lose it through neglect, through falling into error and unbelief, through temptation and sin, and through failing to defend it: seeking peace through compromise rather than standing firm on God's Word. History shows that it's happened time

and again. May the Lord keep it from happening to us that we may not go from feast to famine. Preserve us from this, O Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!