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Commemoration of Martin Luther's Death (11/10/1483 – 2/18/1546)

February 19, 2017¹

Text: John 15:1–11

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

Martin Luther is now 62 years old. His age and his health are catching up to him and he's tired. But there is another task to be done. Three political leaders – brothers in the town of Mansfield, are fighting amongst themselves over money and power. Luther agrees to be the arbitrator, the peacemaker so that God's Church isn't hindered. On January 23, 1546, Luther set out for Mansfeld which is located just northwest of his hometown of Eisleben. On his way, Luther suddenly becomes weak. But the task of bringing peace must be fulfilled. By mid-February, Luther had helped the counts come to an agreement, and peace was restored; but not Luther's strength and vitality.

On Monday, February 15, Luther preached at St. Andrew's in Eisleben. Luther ended his sermon rather abruptly, as he announced to the congregation, "This and much more might be said concerning this Gospel, but I am too weak and we shall let it go at that."²

Luther was taken to a home across the street where he rested for the next two days. Around 8 p.m. on Wednesday, February 17, Luther went to the window and spoke his usual evening prayers. Around 10 p.m., February 17, 1546, Luther went to bed and prayed Psalm 31:5, "Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God."

In his own handwriting, Luther wrote, "Let nobody suppose that he has tasted the Holy Scriptures sufficiently until he has ruled over the churches with the prophets for a hundred years."³ What he writes next gives us a profound insight into Luther's faith and life; it will be the last words written by the man whose pen had accomplished much for God's kingdom, "We are beggars. This is true." Luther believed that without

¹ This sermon was adapted from a sermon provided by the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod for the Commemoration of Martin Luther's death.

² AE 51:392.

³ AE 54:476.

the Jesus Christ, he was nothing. He knew he had nothing to offer God—neither physically nor spiritually.

As Luther went to bed that night feeling ill, and perhaps even suspecting that death was near, he confessed his sins to God and received holy absolution from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it his sins were forgiven before God in heaven (Small Catechism). Luther was prepared for a blessed death for he knew that only Jesus could take him from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven (Small Catechism).

Later that night, Luther awoke. It appeared that he knew his last hour had come. Luther speaks John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” And then Psalm 68:20, “Our God is a God of salvation, and to GOD, the Lord, belong deliverances from death.” He prays the words of Simeon from Luke 2:29, “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word.” And then, three times Luther prays Psalm 31:5, “Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.”

What would give Luther such confidence in his hour of death? How could Luther be so certain? For Luther, such boldness and confidence came from Jesus. The Lord Jesus Christ was the one who had conquered sin, death, and the grave for Luther, for everyone, for you and me. “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13).

This Jesus, who Luther knew and loved and trusted until his last breath, is the same Jesus that claims you and me. Jesus Christ has redeemed you with His own blood, death, and resurrection. He paid the price for all the sins you have ever committed—the sins of your youth, the sins of your flesh, and the sins in your heart and mind. His blood, death, and resurrection continually wash over you in your Baptism, as you are marked and sealed with Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life. The holy body and blood of Jesus Christ feeds and nourishes you with His forgiveness, life and salvation. Jesus is our confidence, now, at the hour of death, for all eternity.

Justus Jonas, a pastor and friend of Luther’s, is our main source of information regarding Luther’s last hours. He was with Luther. Sensing that Luther’s death was imminent, he asked his friend, “Reverend Father, will you remain steadfast in Christ

and the doctrine which you have preached?” Luther replied loudly, “Ja!”⁴ After countless lectures, hundreds of sermons, and thousands of pages of writing, Luther’s final word was “Ja.” “Yes.” Luther was ready to die, trusting in His dear Savior. Luther died about three in the morning of a heart attack. God the Father strengthened and kept Luther in the one true faith and brought him to Himself in heaven.

One of Luther’s favorite portions of Scripture was John 15, which Luther understands as describing the Christian’s life in Christ. Luther believed that Christ lives in and through the Christian. Concerning John 15, Luther writes, “[Jesus] was sent into the world by the Father to redeem us from our sin by His suffering and death, and to reconcile us to the Father, that all who believe in Him might not be damned and lost but have remission of sin and eternal life for His sake.”⁵

Luther continues in the same sermon to say, “Man is first declared clean by God’s Word for Christ’s sake, in whom he believes. For by such faith in the Word he is grafted into the Vine that is Christ and is clothed in His purity, which is imputed to him as his own and is as perfect and complete in him as it is in Christ.”⁶ Dear saints, this saving gospel is what gives us such boldness and confidence. Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (vs. 5). The perfection of Jesus, is given to us. For we are the branches drawing upon the life and vitality of the Vine, the crucified and resurrected Lord of grace and glory.

But such confident can only come from abiding in Christ. Luther warned his congregation not to allow sin and unbelief to sever them from Jesus, “But as it happens, most people live under the illusion that it is unnecessary to be and remain in Christ.”⁷ Did not our Lord Jesus teach us, “If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned”? (vs. 6).

By God’s grace, however, we are attached to the Vine, the Lord Jesus, in life and most certainly in death. In that same sermon on John 15, Luther proclaimed the powerful voice of Christ’s Gospel, “[God] . . . has a stronger and more forceful language and voice than the world and the devil. He will outshout them and compel them to let us

⁴ See Sasse, “Luther’s Legacy to Christianity,” 2:172.

⁵ AE 24:211.

⁶ AE 24:212.

⁷ AE 24:213.

be with Christ and remain His true and fruitful Vine branches.”⁸ And so, “We must see to it that we are always found in Christ, that is, that we hold to His Word and let nothing tear us away from it.”⁹ This is the living faith in which Luther died.

Later that morning, Luther’s body was taken to St. Andrew’s Church. Justus Jonas preached that morning. Pastor Coelius preached the next. Luther’s body was then draped with a white pall, and then with fifty horsemen, the 70-mile journey to Wittenberg began. The crowd grew to the thousands, and steeple bells rang from the churches. Luther’s body arrived in Wittenberg. He was taken to the Castle Church, where twenty-nine years earlier he had nailed the Ninety-Five Theses. Luther was later buried there below the pulpit.

Luther’s pastor, Rev. Bugenhagen, preached the funeral sermon. Bugenhagen expressed thanksgiving to God for Luther’s many gifts to the Church, for Luther’s valiant defense of the Gospel, and for the way in which Luther unlocked the Scriptures concerning Christ. But most of all, Bugenhagen preached about Christ and how He has conquered death. Bugenhagen proclaimed that, through Christ, the death of the body was merely the beginning of life eternal through Jesus Christ, who became the sacrifice for all.

Today, 471 years later, we remember and give thanks to God the Father for Martin Luther. His example of faith in life and death ought to be a source of encouragement and strength. The Lord Jesus kept Martin safe and secure in the ark of the holy Christian Church through the precious gospel and sacraments. Luther died saying “Ya!”, yes to Jesus. As we live today, we say Yes to Jesus. And when our last hour comes, our dear Lord will take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in Heaven. Amen, Amen, Yes, Yes, it shall be so! (Small Catechism)

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

⁸ AE 24:200.

⁹ AE 24:230.