

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

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

November 13, 2016¹

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

Martin Luther is one the most important persons in western history; yea, in world history. His impact on the world is still being felt centuries later. The birth of famous men, however, is usually shrouded in obscurity. That makes sense. Very, very few are born famous. Martin Luther was born to an obscure family in a not-so-important part of Germany on November 10, 1483. At that time, the Christian Church was struggling. The Bible was generally not read; most people in Europe couldn't read the Latin Bible, the Vulgate. And even those who did read and study it, didn't understand it very well. God's Law and God's Gospel were largely confused. God's people longed for rest, physical and spiritual. What they found, however, was more work. Do more or this to please God. Do more of that to secure His good favor, etc. But their good works never seemed sufficient to achieve peace with God. But then again, Holy Scripture taught that good works cannot secure peace with God, but that teaching had been obscured for centuries.

On November 10, 1483, Martin Luther was born to Hans and Margarethe Luther in the little town of Eisleben, Germany. Father Hans did the pious and customary thing to do in those days. The very next day, he took Luther to the church and had him baptized. There was no waiting for family to get together in those days. Infant mortality rates were as high as 60%. One thing the late medieval church understood quite well was that baptism was God's gift that people should receive as soon as possible. Luther was baptized on November 11, 1483, on the feast Day of St. Martin of Tours, a 4th century bishop. The infant Luther received his name in honor at that saint, another pious medieval tradition. Thus, Martin Luther received his earthly name and the Trinitarian name on the same day. In time, the son of a poor, yet pious family would open the pages of Holy Scripture and help the Church recapture its central teaching: that we and all sinners are saved by grace through faith because of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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

It is good for us to remember. History and memory hold the Church together. The Biblical Gospels, after all, are historic narratives that recall the work of Jesus for us. Without Jesus, faith cannot exist. Just so, without a vivid memory of the past, the ties holding us together as the people of God are severed. Scripture itself commands us to remember and give thanks for all of God's saving works performed in human history through the lives of real human beings.

Today we commemorate God's work through His humble servant Martin Luther. We do this not for Luther's own sake; he is not the point. He would be the first to say, "You were not baptized in my name. I was not crucified for you. Remember the Lord Jesus. He's the Savior worthy of honor, love, and praise!" Today we remember that Christ Jesus is faithful in keeping His promises to His people, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against [Christ's Church]" (Matthew 16:18). Jesus is faithful to His promises; yes indeed! Most of the time, however, He uses men, women, and children in bringing His divine promises to fulfillment.

By any honest evaluation, Martin Luther was a simple man. Today, it is hard for us to think of him like that. We know the enormous role he would come to play in world history. His education was typical for his day; he learned hard work and industry from his parents who, were by all accounts, loving yet exceedingly strict.

Luther's early years are full of stories of developing character and, at times, extraordinary events. You may know the story of the thunderstorm that drove him into the monastery. "Help me, St. Ann, and I will become a monk," he cried, fearing for his life. Such a vow was pretty common in those days! Call upon the saints for help in the time of trouble. Make vows of devotion to God in order to secure His favor and blessing. Remember what I said at the beginning? Work, more work.

These kinds of life-changing events, however, aren't really what set Martin Luther apart; many had them, then and now. What made Luther unique was his deep love for the Gospel, which he discovered only later in his life, around 35 or 36 years old. After years of struggling to achieve a righteousness of his own – through his monastic vows, extreme fastings, the physical scourging of his body, sleep deprivation, and hours upon hours of confession before Johann Staupitz, his father confessor. But no lasting peace came. Only later in life, after he earned a doctorate in theology at the new but insignificant University in Wittenberg, did the Holy Spirit open the Scriptures to him. Only then did Luther discover that the righteousness of God was not something that he merited. Peace and righteousness before God was something that

Jesus had already won for him—and for us all—by grace and divine love. This was truly good news, great news, then and now.

You see, dear 21st century saints, the Reformation is still all about Jesus! And Jesus is what we all still need. Historians tell us that Luther's world was steeped in ignorance and superstition. Most people had little or no knowledge of God's Word, because most of them could not read, and Bibles were expensive and scarce. While today we have easy access to God's Word (cheap printing, free Bible apps on your phones, etc), basic human nature hasn't changed. We and all human beings are conceived and born in ignorance and superstition according to God's Word. Nothing has really changed since Luther's time.

And thanks be to God, the saving Gospel of the Lord Jesus hasn't changed either. When Martin Luther rediscovered the Gospel that Jesus had overcome the world and given to all people a righteousness of faith without works of the Law, Luther sought to reform the Church—not overthrow it. He never, to his last breath, sought to start a new church. He only wanted to call the existing Church back to the pure Gospel of God's grace in Christ Jesus.

From tiny Wittenberg, Germany, grew a movement that has not stopped, a confessing movement that seeks always to underscore these truths of God's Word: We are freed from all sins and guilt solely by the grace of God found in our Lord Jesus Christ who died and rose again from the dead. Real forgiveness for real sins committed by real sinners. We receive this new life of divine love and grace simply by believing this Gospel good news. And so the battle cry of the Reformation became "The Word of the Lord endures forever!"

Today, we look to Christ alone. We know, according to Scripture, that no one is justified by works of the law. Don't look to the world; don't look at your strengths or weaknesses; don't look to the things you do, even things like church attendance, prayer, offerings, Bible study, etc. Don't look to the good works you do for your neighbor; don't even look in your heart. In these things, you will only find that God's Word says you have fallen short of the Lord's glory and earned His displeasure, anger, and wrath. We will never find comfort and salvation before God through our works.

Look to Christ and Christ alone. He truly is your comfort, hope, and joy. He has done all things well for you. As true God and true man, He earned God's favor. Through

God's Word, see how He has kept the Law in our place; how He has earned heaven as our inheritance. From God's Word, see that Jesus alone, by His suffering and death on the cross, appeased God's anger and turned away His wrath. See that by His resurrection He has secured our own resurrection unto eternal life. Everything that Jesus did, He did for you and all of His believed people. By His work and love alone we are saved. Jesus, the Son of God, has set you free. And if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed! (cf. John 8:36).

Today, we remember and give thanks for what the Lord Jesus did through Luther's ministry. Though our Church is called Lutheran, we are, and always have been, believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Savior of the world. Him we proclaim! Jesus calms our troubled consciences with His forgiveness. Our rebellious sins of thought, word, and deed are washed away in the life-giving blood of the Lord Jesus. The Lutheran Reformation of the 16th century was all about Jesus Christ. That continuing reformation is still about Jesus!

✠ 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.