

John 8:31-36

We begin with the story of Samson. Not the whole story, but the story at the very end. The Philistines had assembled together in the temple of Dagon. To amuse themselves they brought Samson out of the dungeon and had him stand between the two great pillars upon which the whole temple rested. His eyes had been put out. His strength was gone, for his hair had been cut. Was he free? No. Samson was a slave. He was bound by the Philistines—a plaything to them—chained, strapped between the two great pillars.

There was only one way for Samson to become free—he had to die. To be free from the Philistines; free from their bonds; from the great pillars in Dagon’s temple, Samson had to die. And so he prayed that God would give him the strength to push those great pillars aside. God did, and Samson bent those pillars, and the whole temple came crashing down.

On this festival of the Reformation we begin with the story of Samson, because Martin Luther is Samson. Early in his career as a monk, Luther was not a free man. He was bound between two great pillars. On the one hand was the pillar of his sins and wretchedness. On the other hand stood God’s Law, which condemned him to hell on account of his sin. Luther was bound, like Samson, between these two great pillars. He was not a free man. He was a slave to sin, and to God’s Law which cursed the sinner. He was living a miserable existence. He could not stop sinning. He could not rid himself of the chains of his sinfulness. And because he was a sinner, God’s Law accused him—condemned him to an eternity in hell. Like Samson, Luther was a plaything of the devil. His miserable life was an amusement to Satan. He had no strength to free himself. He had no sight to see a way out.

And like Samson, the only way for Luther to become free, was to die. And as God had freed Samson from his chains, so in His grace, He rescued Martin Luther. He allowed Luther to die—to die to sin, and to the curse of the Law. God opened Luther’s eyes to Jesus Christ—to see His death and resurrection as that which paid the price for all sin, and satisfied the harsh demands of the Law.

The only way to die to sin is to repent. The only way to die to the fierce penalties of the Law is to repent. To turn away from ourselves; away from our efforts, and plead the blood of Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of our sins. In Jesus Christ, Luther found freedom. Freedom from sin. Freedom from the threats of the Law. God brought Luther to the conviction that Jesus had done everything for his salvation. His sins were not a problem anymore—Jesus’ death freed him from their power. The Law could not threaten him anymore—Jesus had satisfied the Law’s demands. “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

To die to sin and the power of the Law, one begins to live in Jesus Christ. As with Luther, so also for you. Your hands and feet may not be chained. You may have full movement of every part of your body. And yet, you friend, may know all too well what it means to be a slave. A slave to sin. A slave to the lusts and desires of the sinful flesh—that Old Adam in us. Are you bound by the full awareness that you do not measure up to what God demands? That you daily fall short of His glory?

But like Samson, you too, have died. In your baptism you died with Christ, says the Apostle Paul. There in the water you were buried with your Savior. And since Christ rose from the dead, in your baptism you now live with Him. You are not a slave to sin. Christ has freed you from its power. You do not have to obey your fleshly desires. They have no control over you, for Jesus is your Master—and He forgives you; He releases you from your sin. Now...Today! For you, by daily contrition and repentance keep returning to your baptism. You learned this truth from the pages of the catechism—that the Old Adam in us is drowned and dies, and a new man arises to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. This happens daily, as the Christian repents of his sin day after day. And that new man in you is Christ. The same Christ who said these words: If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Samson could not free himself. Luther could not free himself. It was the Son of God who freed them from their bonds. Samson died and now lives in heaven with Christ. Luther was freed from the terrors of hell, and that freedom he proclaimed with his mouth and with his pen, so that you and I would be free today. Free in Christ. Free to know His love and forgiveness. Free to believe that eternal life in heaven is ours, not by our efforts, but as a gift through Jesus.

God used Samson to free all of His people from the Philistines. God used Luther to pass down to us the message of freedom and forgiveness in Jesus Christ—the good news that because you died and rose with Christ in baptism, you are free to live each day without fear, as you await with joy, the eternal home God is preparing for you in Jesus Christ. Amen.