

John 8:31-36

If someone came to your door with a gun in their hand, would you let them in? What if that someone was a little person, was dressed up like a cowboy, was carrying a trick-or-treat bag, and came to your door next Saturday evening? October 31st is the one day of the year when homeowners let down their guard. Instead of keeping our doors locked, we eagerly open them to every strange masked figure who shows up on our doorstep. And we even give them candy and goodies. We go out of our way to accommodate action-hero figures, fairy tale characters, even goblins, ghouls, and vampires.

Before the Reformation began on that very same night--October 31st in the year 1517, Martin Luther had been struggling with despair and frustration. He saw himself showing up at God's doorstep, but instead of the door being opened to him and all of the wonderful treats of heaven being given to him, Luther despaired that God's door would remain shut. And not because God was mean and unwelcoming. The door would be closed to Luther because he was dressed in rags, filthy rags. He was unscrubbed, hideous, and he stunk. And this was no costume. Because of his ugly, wretched sinfulness, his hideous disobedience, his willful breaking of the commandments of God, Luther was terrified that God's door--the door to His eternal home--would never be open to him.

He was not comforted by the advice to live the best that he could and not worry so much about the Judgment. During this time in his life Martin Luther did not "know" Christ. He knew the Scriptures. He had studied them and he taught them. He believed in Jesus. But he did not have the faith to stand before God in hope and confidence because when Luther looked ahead to the Judgment and saw himself standing before God's door, he saw Jesus not standing on the doorstep with him telling His Father, "Let him in; he's with Me," but he saw Christ as the Judge blocking the doorway telling him in all seriousness, "I do not know you; depart from Me you sinful man!"

And if you have ever entertained thoughts like these, then thank God for the Reformation, because what God showed Luther in the Gospel, He also declares to you today. If you're a life-long Lutheran Christian, you may never have struggled as Luther did. You have always been taught that God welcomes you and forgives you, wretched sinners though we are, because of Jesus Christ who is our Savior. But even life-long Lutherans have their struggles. Faith doesn't just weaken; faith runs away and hides when Christians like us get caught up in our sins.

Even life-long Lutherans covet, cheat, and steal. I found out last week that a Lutheran pastor in Iowa who was in my circuit and I know very well, resigned earlier this year because he was caught cheating on his wife with prostitutes. This month the St. Louis paper came out with a story about a Lutheran pastor in our Missouri District who was arrested for child pornography. This pastor had been a vice-president in the District and had a family of his own. No Lutheran, pastor or member in the pew, is immune to sin and its temptations. And whether we fall to our knees, being crippled by our sin, or all the way down into the sewer, anyone who sins, Jesus says, is a slave to sin. And a slave, He says, has no permanent place in the house; the door will be closed.

So if we are not terrified as Luther was, maybe we should be. The Law of God condemns us just as it condemned him. We are no better than Martin Luther, are we? We are not better than St. Paul who admitted, "I am the chief of sinners." "Let him who stands," the Bible says, "Take heed lest he fall." But we have a tendency to disregard these words. When we come in to God's House, rather than acting like the Publican who fell on his face and cried, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" we often act like that Pharisee who thought he was better than most people. "I'm not the sinner that he is, or that she is." And yet, even such thinking makes us a slave to sin.

The truth is that every time you and I show up here at God's doorstep we wear a mask. We dress up in a costume--our own idea of how good we are. But we only deceive ourselves, for God sees through our disguise. No one can hide from His Law. "All have turned aside and become wicked," says the Bible. Like Luther, we are filthy with our sinfulness. We break God's commands and we tend to think nothing of it. We are slaves to sin. But like the Jews in Jesus' day we refuse to admit it. At least Luther was willing to admit it. Had he not; had he acted like a smug Pharisee and not like a terrified Publican, not only he, but all of us as well, would likely have perished in unbelief.

But through Luther's terror over his sins God drove him to the good news of Jesus, and that is where you and I must be driven. Pharisees have no use for the Gospel, but if you see yourself as a troubled sinner; like that Publican who confessed his guilt, if you admit that you are a slave to sin and cannot break free from its power, then this good news is for you. God's door is open to you. Yes, you and I are a fright to look at, and it's not because we're wearing costumes. Our sins do make us hideous before God. But friend, know this for certain...when you stand before God, you do not stand alone. Jesus stands with you. "Forgive him, forgive her, Father," He says, "For this one I died."

If you came to God's doorstep without Christ, He would reject you. He would never let you in. Heaven would forever be closed to you. But come in faith. Come baptized into Christ. Come with His shed blood covering your sins. Come confessing His saving name, and God's House is your House. "The Son remains in the House forever," Jesus says, "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

The Reformation teaches us that we do not need to be terrified of the final Judgment because you do not die alone. As you live in Christ, so you die with Him. And He brings you to God's doorstep. And Jesus tells His Father, "Father, he is with Me, she is with Me." And heaven's door is open to you because it is Jesus' House and you are with Him, and He is with you. No Judge will stand there to block your way. No Judge will look upon your entire life of many dreadful sins and say, "You cannot come in. You are a slave to sin. You are filthy. Depart from Me." You are with Jesus. His baptism has washed you. His holy innocence clothes you. His precious blood covers you. Jesus sets you free from your sins because He forgives you for all of them. And when Luther understood this; when he was led to this good news in the Bible, he was free of the fear of Judgment; free of his despair. He could live in peace and would die in peace for he was with Jesus, and Jesus was with him forever.

Whether you are a life-long Lutheran; whether you became a Lutheran later in life; whether you are only visiting; whether you struggle with many temptations; whether you have fallen to your knees or been taken by sin's power all the way down into the sewer, this good news is for you. Jesus sets you free. He breaks the power of sin in your life. His death for you was not in vain. He defeated sin, death, and hell, and He did this for you. No judgment awaits you. In death, as in life, Jesus is with you and for you. And in the end, as you stand at God's eternal doorstep, Jesus says, "My House is your House." No more masks, no more costumes, no more sin, no more death, or doubt, or temptation. The door, for you, is open, because you are with Christ, and He is with you. Amen.