

27 October 2002
The Festival of the Reformation

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Alexandria, VA

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“Our Freedom in Christ”

Text: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Holy Gospel that we heard this evening were words spoken by Jesus while He was in Jerusalem, celebrating one of the three great pilgrim festivals of the Jews – the Feast of Tabernacles, or as it was also known, the Feast of Booths. And this festival was a particularly joyous one, because it came at the end of the harvest season, when the people could rejoice not only in the abundance of the harvest they had received, but also that the work of the harvest was now completed. And for the seven days of this festival they got a chance to rest and rejoice and remember the goodness of the Lord. . . . But they were to remember also why and how they were there, in Jerusalem, in the land of Israel. They were also, at this festival, to remember the deliverance of God in the Exodus. And that was the reason for the booths. For regarding this festival, the Word of the Lord recorded in Leviticus states: *“You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”*

And so an important part of this festival was the reflection of the people on their **utter dependence on God**. The reason why they were a people, the reason why they had their land, was due to nothing that they were or did – it was completely the work of the LORD for them. And if there was any one time in their history that revealed that fact more than any other, it was the Exodus. For while the Israelites were wandering around the desert for 40 years, they were in every way completely and utterly dependent on God. For in the desert there is no food, no water, no place to get or make new clothing or shoes; there is no protection from enemies or animals or from the weather, and nothing to guide you in your travel. There is nothing. And yet the children of Israel had everything they needed. Bread from Heaven, water from a rock, clothing that did not wear out, guidance from a pillar of cloud and light, and protection and rescue from all their enemies. And all of this not *because* of what they did, but *in spite* of what they did! For their response to all of this goodness was to often grumble against God in dissatisfaction and rebellion! And yet God was faithful to His people. God abundantly gave to His people. And God rescued His people, and brought them to their Promised Land. . . . And so during the Feast of Booths, the people were to remember this undeserved goodness of the LORD,

and rejoice and give thanks for His continuing goodness and provision, for He is still caring for His people, and providing for them.

Now you may be wondering, what does all of that have to do with our celebration of the Reformation today? Well, actually a great deal! For what was true of Old Testament Israel in the Exodus, is true for the New Testament Church, the New Israel, the new people of God, today. And it was the Reformation that once again brought into the clear light our utter dependence upon God – that we are not saved from this wilderness of sin and death *because* of anything that we manage to do, but, in fact, *in spite* of all that we do! The reason why you and I are children of God is due to nothing that we are or did – it is completely the work of the LORD for us. . . . And for a while, the church had forgotten about that, and had again begun to depend upon what we can do, our good works, our worthiness. But the Reformation called the Church back to the Word of God, and back to the realization that everything we have comes from the LORD alone. That as we heard from Romans earlier, ***“For by works of the law”*** – or, by what we can do – ***“no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”***

And one of the prophets that Paul was referring to there in Romans was the prophet Jeremiah. And in the Old Testament reading, we heard Jeremiah’s words concerning this work of God regarding both Old Testament Israel, and the New Israel, the Church. God’s work of old, and His new work: ***“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord.”*** . . . Or in other words, the old covenant, the old Exodus from Egypt, is going to be surpassed. A new covenant, a new Exodus is going to be performed by God, a covenant that cannot be broken. And the days are coming, declares Jeremiah – the days are coming when God will accomplish this.

Well, Jesus is announcing at the Feast of Booths in Jerusalem, at this feast celebrating God’s goodness and faithfulness in the harvest and *in the Exodus* – Jesus is announcing that that new time is now here! That God is now performing and establishing His new Exodus, His new covenant, in Him, in Jesus. For in Him we will now be led to the Promised Land of Heaven. In Him we have all that we need. In Him ***“God has forgiven our iniquity and remembered our sins no more.”*** . . . Now, did Jesus say all of that in just the few verses that we read in the Holy Gospel earlier? No, but in the *context* of all that Jesus said at this Feast – the verses all around the Holy Gospel for today – He does! And so let’s compare. Remember what I said before about the Exodus, and being

completely and utterly dependent upon God? In their wandering in the desert, what did the people need? *They needed food.* In the Exodus they received manna, and in John chapter 6 Jesus says, ***“I am the living bread that comes down from Heaven.”*** The new is here. *They needed water.* In the Exodus they received water from a rock, and in John chapter 7 at the Feast Jesus says, ***“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.”*** The new is here. *They needed guidance.* In the Exodus they were guided by a pillar of fire by night, and in John chapter 8 Jesus says, ***“I am the light of the world.”*** The new is here. *And they needed protection, deliverance, and freedom from their slavery.* In the Exodus the hand of the LORD freed them from the grip of the Pharaoh, and in the Holy Gospel for today Jesus says, ***“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples”*** – or, my followers, in this Exodus – ***“and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. . . . [And] if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”*** . . . There is a new Exodus happening, in the love and care and redemption of the Son, Jesus Christ. And just like the first Exodus, it is completely and solely the work of the LORD for us. And all this we are given, again, not *because* of anything that we are or do, but *in spite* of all that we are and do – in spite of our sin and rebellion and the grumbling with which we often repay God. In spite of our unworthiness. All of this ***“by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”*** And so in Him and by His hand we do have everything we need, and have been freed from the grip of our enemies – our enemies named sin, Satan, and the grave.

And again, it was the Reformation that once again brought this wonderful news back to light in the Church, and to the people. Perhaps because for so long Luther himself felt so much like he was wandering in the wilderness. Stuck in the desert of his sin, feeling the attacks and assaults of Satan on every side, knowing that no effort on his part was good enough or merited anything in the eyes of God. He was hungry and thirsty for God’s love and forgiveness in a world that seemed like an endless desert. He felt like a slave, and the farthest thing from a son. . . .

And how much like that is the world we live in today? And although many people won’t admit it, how much like Luther are they? For although we have plenty of food and water and clothing and house and home, how many still feel like a wilderness inside? Alone, and searching for meaning in this world. Although we live in “the land of the free and the home of the brave,” how many today are captive to their fears and what might happen to them? And although we like to think of ourselves as being self-sufficient, and able, how many today are being struck down by diseases of body and mind, and brought to the realization that we are not self-sufficient, not in the least. . . . And we’re hungry, and we’re thirsty – not for what this world can give us, but for what this world cannot give us. And not for what we can do for ourselves, because we’ve tried to do it ourselves and it doesn’t work! Those things cannot satisfy. Not really. . . . It’s a hunger and thirst for

God. For His love and forgiveness, and what only He can provide in this world that can seem like an endless desert. ***“For there is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** . . . It’s true, isn’t it?

But then into this world stepped the One who would lead us in our Exodus. The Son of God, born in a stable, preaching in the wilderness, the friend of tax collectors and sinners, crucified on a cross, and laid in a grave. He came into this wilderness, right where we are, took our sin and death and led us through in an exodus to the other side – to the resurrection and the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. And this Son of God is still coming into this wilderness and rescuing. Rescuing us who have lost our way. Rescuing us who are captive to fear and sin. Rescuing us who are alone and searching and struggling. . . . Just as He came to a struggling, sinful monk, so thirsty and alone, named Martin Luther. . . . And as Jesus came to Luther through His Word, the Word of Truth, Luther was set free. Free in the free forgiveness of His sins. Free in the free and full assurance of salvation and eternal life. And free in the free food and drink that Jesus has come to give to all people. And Luther at last received what He had been so longing for, and ate and drank deeply of the gifts of God, eagerly devouring His Word and Sacrament and rejoicing as if at the festival himself! For ***“the Son had set him free! And he was free indeed.”*** And he knew that he had received all of this – as he would later write in the Small Catechism – *“solely out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me.”* He knew that he was completely and utterly dependent upon His Saviour for this exodus.

And just as Jesus came to Luther, so He comes to you and I, today, in His “Strong Word,” in His washing of Baptism, and in His holy body and blood in Communion. He comes to us here in His Church where we have **an oasis** for our souls in this wilderness of sin and death. Here is a place of rest and forgiveness and refreshment, where the Word – the Word made flesh – comes to us and rescues us and lives in us and sets us free. And abiding in His Word, we are free. For we know the truth – the truth which sets us free – for He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Perhaps we sometimes take all of that for granted. We hear it so often in our Church, and we know it so well. But so did Israel . . . so did the early church . . . and our enemies are strong and persistent, and want nothing less than for us to again depend upon anything or anyone except Jesus. And so it is good that we, just like Israel, have an annual festival to remember and celebrate the wonderful news of our salvation and our Saviour; to remember and celebrate the undeserved goodness of our God who saves us and upon whom we are completely and utterly dependent; to remember and celebrate that *“all this He does solely out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me.”* . . . For Israel, it was the Feast of Booths. For us, it is the

Reformation. But the good news is the same. The rescue is the same. The forgiveness is the same. That in Christ we are being set free, and ***“if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed!”***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.