

30 October 2005
The Festival of the Reformation
Baptism of Joanna Christine Douthwaite

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Set Free!”

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

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

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

This morning, Joanna Christine was set free.

Oh, some will disagree with that statement. After all, what could Joanna possibly be enslaved to? She’s only a baby! And only 6 days old. She’s never been enslaved to anyone.

But we confessed in our liturgy earlier exactly this reality; the reality of our sin. *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”* Perhaps you will allow me to modify that statement somewhat, and say: *“If we say SHE has no sin, we deceive ourselves . . .”* Yes, Joanna Christine is a sinner like the rest of us. She is because of the sin she inherited from me, just as she inherited from me her dark hair and blue eyes. She is not a sinner because she *does* sins – if that were the case, I suppose you *could* argue about whether or not she has actually committed any sins yet, and therefore whether or not she is a sinner. But she is not a sinner because of whatever sins she may commit, now or in the future – she will commit sin, rather, because she is a sinner. We do what we are. And Joanna, as innocent as she looks, was born a slave to sin. Just like you and me.

But this morning, she was set free.

And it happened to her; was not because of anything she did. For she can do nothing. It doesn’t take very long to see that. That left on her own, she would surely die. No – in fact, her spiritual condition was *even worse* than that, for she was not even born alive spiritually – but dead. Dead in sin. (Eph 2:1) Spiritually stillborn, *until* she was born again. *Until* the Word of God came to her in the waters of Holy Baptism, and gave her life. Life

from the dead. And so today we witnessed a resurrection! Joanna Christine, set free from her bondage to sin and death, and given a new life. A new life as a child of God, in the House of God, by the Word of God. And as we heard, ***“if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”***

But today is not just about Joanna. Today is also about you. To remember that the Word of God, the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, has set you free. And not because of anything that you did, or do. Not because of your service; not because of your dedication; not because of any decision you have made. For to Him, you are as Joanna. Helpless.

It took Martin Luther a while to realize that. Many people today have trouble realizing that! Even you and me. Because we *want* there to be *something* in us; *something* we can do for God; even if it's the littlest thing. Some reason in me why God would choose me . . . even if it's only that just as little 6 day olds, *we are so cute!* But little 6 day olds turn into not-so-cute screaming monsters at 3 in the morning. And so it is with us! Inside, we're not so cute. We're black. With sin and death. And helpless.

But to know that is *a good thing!* It's terribly humbling, and difficult to accept! But it's a good thing. Because if it were up to something in you to make you acceptable to God, to make Him choose you, then what happens if one day that is no longer there? If it were your cuteness, then what when you're not so cute anymore? If it were something you did, then what if you didn't do that one day? If it were your usefulness, then what if one day you're not useful to Him anymore? You could never be sure, but always in doubt. Will God love me today? Will He accept me today? Is there someone else cuter, better?

But there's not! We heard that earlier: ***“For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** Or in other words, none of us are cute in God's eyes! None good, no one better than another. And that's good (even though it *sounds* bad!) because that means it's not a competition. It's not me against you; both of us trying to outdo the other for God's favor and attention. No. No distinction. No difference. Nothing in us at all. And that's what makes what St. Paul continues and says the most wonderful news of all: ***“For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”***

It is all a gift. Today, Joanna received that gift. Today, so do we. The gift of sins forgiven. The gift of life. The gift of faith. The gift of resurrection. *For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.* (Small Catechism, Holy Baptism, part II) All gift. Nothing earned. Nothing deserved. Ever. And God will not ever change His mind, and withdraw this gift. How do we know? Because to keep His promise, to establish His

new covenant, His new testament (Jer 31), He sent His Son. He sent His Son to offer His life on the cross. To give His life for ours. A trade; a ransom; an atonement – that the unworthy might be worthy. And when Jesus rose from death, His resurrection proved that that ransom has been paid, in full, for the life of the world. For no sin, no death. And no death, then no power of the devil. And no power of the devil, then we have been set free! ***“And if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed!”***

And we know it also because God didn't just send His Son *once* into this world to set us free with His death and resurrection – He *keeps* coming, *keeps* conquering, *keeps* forgiving and setting free, as He keeps applying His death and resurrection *to us*. And so He came this morning and set Joanna free through His Word combined with the water of Holy Baptism. ***And if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed!*** And He came this morning and set you free through His Word of Absolution, not just announcing but *actually giving* you the forgiveness of your sins. ***And if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed!*** And He is coming again this morning and setting you free through His Word combined with the bread and wine of Holy Communion, giving you His life and forgiveness in His resurrected body and blood. ***And if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed!*** So many gifts that we receive here – and not just today, but every Sunday, every day. The gifts never running out, never changing. And all gift. Nothing earned. Nothing deserved. Ever.

You know, we *say* that a lot in the Lutheran Church. Especially at Reformation. And because we say it so much, perhaps we take it for granted. And so today, it's good to *see* it also. To see the helplessness of Joanna, and know: **that's us**. Because Satan is always tempting us higher. Always tempting us to think something of ourselves, to trust in something in me, in my abilities, in my faith, in my knowledge, in my moving closer to God. *Anything* to take our attention off of Christ crucified for me, and to look at what *I* can do. Because Satan is all about wages and getting what we deserve! But our Saviour is all about gifts and receiving what we don't deserve.

And that's what today, the Festival of the Reformation is all about, because that's what the Gospel is all about. The free gifts of God that are ours in Christ Jesus. The gifts that set us free. The Word that set a monk named Martin Luther free. The Word that set a baby named Joanna free. And the Word that sets you and me free. His Word that we sang about: His Strong Word that once cleaved the darkness (LW 328); His one little Word that fells Satan (LW 298); and His Word that bespeaks us righteous (LW 328), raising sinners dead in sin to new life in Christ. A new life, a resurrected life, that will never end.

And that actually is how Joanna received her name – from the resurrection. For we read in Luke 24: ***“But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women] went to the***

tomb . . . but they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus . . . two men said to them, 'He is not here, but has risen.' . . . And they remembered His words. . . . Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them . . ." And just as a woman named Joanna was one of the first witnesses of the resurrection, so in Holy Baptism today our Lord has promised *another Joanna* that she will see the same. For just as Jesus is risen from the dead, now so has Joanna. His empty tomb is now her empty tomb, His life now her life. This morning was a resurrection, and Joanna was set free! And in Christ Jesus, so are we.

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.