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The Festival of the Reformation [observed]

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The New Normal”

Text: John 8:31-36; Romans 3:19-28; Revelation 14:6-7

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

There's been a new phrased coined in our civil discourse of late, and that is folks talking about “the new normal.” Is the constant threat of terrorism *the new normal*? Are gas prices around \$4 a gallon *the new normal*? Is our current partisan divide and the seeming inability for our political parties to work together *the new normal*? Or in other words, are these things here to stay and so you better get used to them as *normal* now, or are they just temporary glitches or passing events? Depending on who you talk to, you'll get different answers to those questions.

But it seems to me that we can use that phrase when talking about the Christian life. That in Christ, there is a *new normal* for you and me. For in Christ, things change. In Christ, things are different. In Christ, we have been made new and so there is a *new normal* for Christians, which is truly a whole new way of life and of looking at life.

That's what Martin Luther discovered when he realized what the Gospel meant. Once he understood that the righteousness of God was not a standard being held up that he had to achieve in order to gain salvation and be pleasing to God, but was rather a *gift* from God, achieved not by Him but by Christ for Him, that changed everything! That rocked his world . . . and, once that message began to be preached again, rocked much of the rest of the world, too.

For it meant there was a *new normal* for us - that we are no longer under the burden of the Law, having to fulfill all the commandments and rules and statutes of God if there be any hope for us, but that in Christ we have been set free from all that, and that our hope is not in us but in Him. The *new normal* is not fear but joy, not condemnation but forgiveness, not the burden of the Law but the freedom of the Gospel. For as Jesus said, ***if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*** *That's the new normal.*

Normal, we could say, was the way everything started in the beginning. When God created all that exists, including this world, and then put our first parents, Adam and Eve into it to take care of it and enjoy it, normal was perfection, love, joy,

peace - only and always good. No sin, no discord, no condemnation.

But, of course, things quickly changed. Once Adam and Eve turned away from God and His Word there was a *new normal* - there would be strife between the husband and wife, there would be pain and struggle in childbirth, Adam's pleasant work of caretaking would become the hard toil and labor of working the earth which would now be plagued with thorns and thistles . . . but most of all, and most serious of all, there would be death. Because of sin, *the new normal* would be pain and tears, separation and sadness.

But there was also another part of this *new normal* that came at this time as well: **the promise of God**, that our Father would not turn His back on His children, but would send a Saviour to rescue creation from this bondage to sin, deal a death blow to satan, and give life again. And so *the new normal* was not only pain and tears, separation and sadness, *but also faith and hope*. The *new normal* was not just enduring the present, but **looking in hope** to the future and **waiting in faith** for the promise of God.

That *new normal* lasted a long time as the promise was passed down through the generations, and sadly, sometimes was forgotten. And when it was, folks at times just tried to make the best of *the new normal* - thinking: *this is just the way life is*. Or, some folks said *we can do better*, and they tried, and maybe they even succeeded for a while. But normal is called normal for a reason, and things would go back to the way they were before . . . or worse, for that's what sin does: *sin makes things worse*. It's like the bike you leave out in rain - the rust just gets worse and worse. You might be able to fix it up from time to time, but eventually the rust wins, and it dies.

But though man often forgot the promise, our Father in heaven never did. And so the Son of God became flesh and was made man, that there be *another new normal*. The *new normal* that St. Paul spoke of in the verses from Romans that we heard today: that the righteousness of God has come *and is given as a gift through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe*.

A gift, because it had to be a gift. Because no matter how much we think or say we *can do better*, we can't. Oh, maybe we can in politics and economics and the things of this world, but not in the things of God. When Adam and Eve tried to do better they made things worse. And we don't fair any better. Think about it - how often have you tried to make something better but only wound up making things worse? Your words came out differently than you meant them, your generosity was seen as an insult, your kindness interpreted as condescension, you made promises you couldn't keep, and on and on. Either our sin gets in the way, or somebody else's sin, or both! For it's true what Paul wrote: from Adam and Eve to you and me

and for the generations to come after us, **there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** So if there's going to be better, if there's going to be a *new normal*, it will have to be done by God.

And it has! That's the *new normal* that rocked Luther's world: **the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.**

Now, *propitiation* is a big word, but it simply means an atonement, or a substitute. That Jesus, the Son of God made man, became your substitute. He took your place in this *new normal*, taking your sin, your death, and your condemnation and paying the price for it, atoning for it, with His blood and death on the cross. All that you did and do, all the sin *you* should be held responsible for, *He* took and was held responsible for in your place, as your substitute. And by His blood He atoned for it; He made you right again with God. And by faith in Jesus and all this work He did for you, **that atonement becomes your forgiveness**, and you are set free.

Now that's quite different than what Luther had been told and taught. The focus at that time had been all on what he did and had to do, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not *do better*; he could not create a *new normal*. And maybe you've experienced that as well. But once he realized he didn't have to, that God was the one who did it *for him* in Jesus, *the new normal* began for him. He preached the joy, not the burden, of Christ. He loved and served not because he had to, but because he had been set free from having to save himself and so now he could serve others and help them. This *new normal* in Christ put everything back in its right place again.

And so it is for you. For as we heard in Revelation, this is ***an eternal Gospel*** - it is eternal good news - ***for every nation and tribe and language and people.*** For you. That in Christ there is indeed a *new normal*.

For when you are **baptized** into Christ, born from above as a child of God, *there is a new normal for you.*

When you receive the **forgiveness** of your Saviour, won on the cross for you, the judgment of God executed against Jesus on the cross and now forgiveness given here to you for all your dirty deeds, cleaning out all the skeletons in your closet, *there is a new normal for you.*

When the **Word of God** is proclaimed to you, and you realize that all those stories in the Bible aren't just about others but they're about you - that *you* have been rescued, that *you* have been healed, that *you* have been fed and provided for, that the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon *you*, *there is a new normal for you.*

When you receive the **Supper** of our Lord here - not the bread of toil and tears but the true Body and Blood of your atonement, that the one whose touch brought healing and life to so many now here touches you and gives you life and salvation, *there is a new normal for you.*

A wonderful new normal that begins now and lasts forever.

And so the new normal we have in Christ is something quite different that what the world means with that phrase. For that phrase is used negatively by the world - a change for the worse that you just have to get *used* to. But here in the church it is a change for the better that you get to *rejoice* in! And a joy to take out into the world, into every relationship, every place, to every person.

The new normal: that there is hope for the hopeless, help for the helpless, love for the unloved, care for those in need, and life for the dying. In Christ.

The new normal no matter who wins the election in 9 days.

The new normal no matter what Sandy does to us in the next few days.

The new normal whether you lose or keep your job, whether healthy or sick.

The new normal no matter what this world throws up against you.

That in Christ, you are joined to the one who transcends all that, and in Him you are in a Mighty Fortress.

That's what we celebrate this day. That's the source of our joy this day. That yes, that's *the new normal* for us.

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.