

29 October 2017
The Festival of the Reformation

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Slaying the Monster of Uncertainty”

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

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

You don't know. You can't know.

That's what they told Luther. That's what was being taught at the time of the Reformation, some 500 years ago.

You don't know. You can't know.

And that plagued Luther. That monster of uncertainty, as he called it. Was his repentance good enough? Sincere enough? *You don't know. You can't know.* Was he doing enough good works? *You don't know. You can't know.* Had he achieved enough? Would he be saved? *You don't know. You can't know.*

And that monster of uncertainty created another monster for Luther: God Himself. Luther hated the God who filled him with such doubt and put him through such agony. And, Luther realized, his *did not know* and *could not know* also meant that he did not know and could not know God. What God thought of him. If God really loved him. Luther. Augustinian monk. Trying his best, but *knowing* this: his best wasn't good enough.

Why can't we know? he wondered. Why doesn't God just tell us?

Well, He has. On the cross. There's your enough. There's your good. There's how you know God loves you. There's your certainty. That God would give His Son for you. To die for you, that you might live. That you know who God is and know His wonderful salvation.

Luther finally came to understand that as he studied the writings of St. Paul. And we heard it today from St. Paul. Your ears and eyes probably passed right over those words without realizing how important they are. For what did Paul say to us today? The first three words of the Epistle: **Now WE KNOW.**

And as we read on in that reading from Romans, we learned two things that **WE KNOW:** first, that we are sinners and will never be justified in the sight of God by what we do. **All**

have sinned and fall short. All. You, me, no one excepted. So *no one can boast.* Your righteousness will never measure up.

But then second, **WE KNOW** this too: there's another righteousness, another right-ness, a justification that comes apart from what we do and how well we do it. Justification that is a gift, received by faith. Faith, trust, in what Jesus has done for us.

If you look at yourself or to yourself, *you don't know* and *you can't know.* But if you at Jesus, on the cross, crucified for you, suffering for you, there as your substitute, there to forgive you, then yes. **WE KNOW.** We know God. We know His love. We know that He has saved us.

That word, that truth, made all the difference for Luther. It changed his world. And with the Reformation, it changed the world.

But how important that **WE KNOW** hit me again this week as I was talking to a friend of mine, who said to me: *I don't know. I don't know that if I died I would be saved.* And I think a lot of people today are that way, but instead of saying *I don't know,* they say this: I hope so. I hope I will be saved. I hope God loves me. I hope Jesus is for me. I hope, but . . . *I don't know. I can't know.* Maybe you think or feel that way sometimes, too. When things aren't going your way, when you keep messing up, when the sin in you, or the sin that erupts out of you, seems so bad.

And that's when we return to the words of St. Paul. He said: **WE KNOW.** Not because I'm good enough, but because Jesus is. Not because of my promise to God, but because of His promises to me. Not because of what I do, but because of what He has done. Not because of what I give to God, but because of what He gives to me. **WE KNOW** because God is on the cross *for me,* in the Font *for me,* in His Word *for me,* and on the altar *for me.* If He wasn't *for me,* He wouldn't be there in those places *for me.* But He is. He is!

That's why our Synod chose for its theme this year of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation those words that are on the cover of your bulletin: *It's Still All About Jesus.* Because it is. 500 years ago, and still today.

That's a good reminder because, even though it sounds funny to say, it's so easy to forget.

For example, this 500th anniversary year is a big deal, right? Lots of books have been published, videos made, new web sites constructed, lots of publicity. And pastors can get caught up in it, too, and think - like with Christmas and Easter: *gotta have a corker of a sermon today!* Something special! Something really memorable! Worthy of such an auspicious occasion.

But as my friend reminded me this week . . . no. That's not it at all. I kinda doubt you'll remember what I preached today at all, no matter good or bad it is. Or if something sticks, you won't remember that it was me who said it. And that's okay. For what you need to hear today is what you need to hear every week: *That's It's Still All About Jesus*. And that **WE KNOW**. We know God. We know His love. We know His forgiveness is apart from anything we do. **WE KNOW**, you can be sure, He is for you. All that He is and all that He has is **for you**.

So don't let that monster of uncertainty come back out from under the bed, or out of the closet, or back from hell. Because he'll try. Count on it. He'll try to do to you what he did to Luther some 500 years ago: get you to doubt God and His love for you. *Make God into the monster, instead of him*.

And some of the ways he tries to do that? Well, like he did with Luther. You say you're sorry for your sins . . . *but are you?* Are you *really* sorry? Are you *really* repentant? Then why haven't you stopped doing those things? Why haven't you improved? You have to prove it, you know. Show it. So where's the evidence? And is it enough? Have you done enough? Well enough? And what about this? Forgive and forget. But you haven't forgotten, have you? So you haven't really forgiven, have you? You're not really heaven material at all, are you? You don't know. You can't know.

No! **WE KNOW**, Paul says. No ifs, ands, buts, maybes, or perhapses about it. Don't listen to the monster. Listen to what has Jesus said to you! I baptize you. I forgive you. I give you.

I baptize you. You are my child. I give you my name. You are mine. Your home is my home, and my home is your home.

I forgive you. Your sins are gone. Because I took them, to the cross. They're mine now, not yours. My responsibility, not yours. I'll pay for them, not you.

I give to you. My Body and Blood. That hung on the cross for you, that rose from the dead for you. To feed you and strengthen you. To give you what you need.

There are no ifs, ands, buts, maybes, or perhapses in those words. Only truth. Only promises. Only certainty. Only it is finished. Period. Done. Or as Jesus said in the Gospel we heard today: ***That you may KNOW that if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*** Free from sin, free from death, free from fear. Free to serve, free to love, free to live.

And that's really what the Reformation is all about. *It's Still All About Jesus*. This *eternal Gospel for every nation and tribe and language and people*, as John said in Revelation. And as we heard in the Gradual: That we *may tell the next generation that this is God*,

our God forever and ever. Or as the hymn we sang a little earlier put it:

*O Spirit, who didst once restore
Thy Church that it might be again
The bringer of good news to men (LSB #834 v.4).*

That good news that **WE KNOW**, and proclaim, and live.

So for today at least, that will be our *one little word*, that Luther wrote about in his hymn *A Mighty Fortress* (LSB #656):

*This world's prince may still Scowl fierce as he will,
He can harm us none. He judged; the deed is done;
One little word can fell him (v. 3).*

Many have wondered over the years what Luther meant by that “one little word?” Some think it is the word *Jesus*, some think the word *forgiveness*, others think it the Greek word *tetelestai*, which means: *it is finished*. Maybe Luther didn't specify so that we would think *all* those things. All those good things.

But for us, today, let our “one little word” be this: **WE KNOW** . . . which, yes, is one word in the Greek.

WE KNOW our God and Father, and His love shown to us in His Son, Jesus Christ.

WE KNOW our Saviour and brother Jesus; His love shown to us on the cross and His forgiveness spoken to us and His life given to us here through His Word and Spirit.

WE KNOW. His promises, which are more sure than anything in this world.

WE KNOW. And so we have peace and joy. It changes our world. Because **the monster of uncertainty is slain**.

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.