

Martin Luther

This Sunday is Reformation Sunday. On this day, many Protestant churches remember the life and ministry of a man named Martin Luther.

On a hot day in July 1505, a 20-year old university student was walking near Stoderheim, Germany. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning struck near this young man who cried out inexplicably, "Help me St. Anne, I will become a monk." Strange as it may sound, Martin Luther became a monk. His spiritual struggle would culminate in a theological and spiritual movement which would leave permanent marks on Western Europe and eventually America: a movement called the Protestant Reformation

What drove Martin Luther to cry out to St. Anne, become a monk, and basically torture himself for the next 10 years? It was the deep angst and anxiety of a soul who trembled before a Holy God. Luther tried everything to get right with God. He left the pursuit of a law career and enrolled in an Augustine monastery.

Luther, as a young monk, sought salvation through personal denouncement. He lived on a scanty diet, wore rough clothes, and humbled himself by begging. He awoke at 1:30 each morning to march into a cold church, pour holy water on his head, and begin a rigorous practice of spiritual disciplines. For Luther, the disciplines went far beyond seeking to attract the attention of God. He was doing everything and anything to resolve the angst of his soul.

When self-denunciation did not work to relieve his soul, he tried confession of sins. Daily, following a spiritual primer of the recitation of the Ten Commandments and the seven deadly sins, he entered into a 1 to 3 hour confession of his sins. The priest who heard his sins, a kindly gentleman named Staupitz, became so frustrated with Luther that he once said, "Next time you come to me with something to confess, let it be patricide, adultery, or blasphemy, but not these little peccadilloes" (minor sins).

Luther, in utter despair, finally came to the spiritual conclusion that he could not confess all his sins. He learned the Biblical truth articulated by the theologian, Augustine, "non posse, non peccare." He was not able to not sin. He was a sinner because he sinned. Even more despairing was the truth that he sinned because he was a sinner.

Third, Luther sought to be right with God with the help of the merits of the saints. In that day, it was believed you could tap into a treasury of the merits of the saints. Some of the great saints had done more good than was needed to be saved. Therefore, a reservoir of excess righteousness was available for people who needed the additional merit. One of the ways to tap into the reservoir of saintly righteousness was through ancient relics. People supposedly had such sacred things, including a strand of Jesus' swaddling clothes, holy bones from the saints, or a tooth of St. Jerome. For a small price, of course, you could view, touch, or pray over these relics and receive merit for your soul or the soul of a loved one.

The year 1510 was a big year for Martin Luther because he was able to make a spiritual pilgrimage to the eternal city of Rome. Rome was the quintessential religious city where one could have access to many relics, worship in many churches, and walk where many of the saints had walked. What he found in the eternal city was far from holy. He found priests who were irreverent, who ridiculed the people, and who were far more interested in personal gain than godliness.

In a last ditch effort to find salvation in Rome, he decided to climb the steps of the Scalia Sancta at the Chapel of St. Lawrence. The belief was that the 28 stairs had come from Pontius Pilate's judgment hall. Jesus had walked on these steps. He crawled up each stair, repeating the Lord's Prayer, kissing each stair, and hoping for salvation. Yet, when he arrived at the top of the stairs, he still experienced a deep angst of the soul. His conclusion about his time in Rome was, "He had gone to Rome with onions and had returned with garlic." Nothing seemed to bring relief for his soul.

In 1511, in the good providence of God, Luther was sent to a new university in the German city of Wittenberg. Staupitz, his spiritual mentor, encouraged him to cease his teaching of philosophy and study and instead teach the Bible. He became a professor of the Scriptures.

In 1513, Luther lectured on the book of Psalms. Psalm 22 impressed him because Luther realized that Jesus too had experienced a deep angst of the soul. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent" (Mark 15:34; Psalm 22:1-2).

In 1515, Luther taught the letter to the Romans. He began to ponder what God's righteousness meant. "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'" (Romans 1:17).

The light began to come on when he studied Romans 4:1-3, which states, "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather

according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'"

Luther had been taught that the doctrine of justification was God making us good enough to be received by God, but we had to sustain His mercy by the sacraments and good works. Now, Luther's eyes were opening to the liberating truth of the Scriptures. Justification is the gift of God whereby we receive by faith the righteousness of Christ who lived a life we could not live, bore a wrath we could not bear, and died a death we could not die. Salvation was by Christ alone, grace alone, and by faith alone.

Finally, Luther found rest for his weary soul. In his own words, he said, "Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the just shall live by faith. Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which, through grace and sheer mercy, God justifies us by faith. Thereupon, I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open gates into Paradise."