

*Jesus said to them: “Watch out that no one deceives you. <sup>6</sup> Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. <sup>7</sup> When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. <sup>8</sup> Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.*

*<sup>9</sup> “You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. <sup>10</sup> And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. <sup>11</sup> Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. (Mark 13:5-11)*

### Who Needs the Reformation?

It’s one of the most famous scenes in Lutheran history. Martin Luther stood alone before the emperor and all the princes and lords of church and state. And they demanded that he answer one question: will you recant? Will you take back all that you’ve said over the last four years? Will you stop preaching the gospel and call it a lie? And make no mistake about it, Luther was awed and troubled. He had to ask for a day to consider his reply. He expected that if he did not take it all back, they would burn him at the stake. So what did he say? “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot recant. To go against one’s conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand!”

It was a dramatic scene and it’s been painted and recreated in movies and described in books. But it was also almost 500 years ago. And you might be thinking, “What does that have to do with me?” In fact, when you looked at your bulletin and saw that we’re celebrating the Reformation today, you might have groaned, figuring that today’s sermon is going to be a history lesson. And who needs that? We have more important things to talk about. You might even say this whole business of the Lutheran Reformation is overblown. Why come back to it every year? Who cares? **Who needs the Reformation?**

#### I.

Will you be shocked when I say, “You do”? You know that’s what I’m going to say. But I’m not going to say it just because I’m a Lutheran pastor. I’m going to say it because the Lutheran Reformation is all about the realities that Jesus describes in the gospel lesson for this morning. **Who needs the Reformation? You do because you will suffer here.**

In the gospel lesson Jesus discussed the end times – the times before he comes back. He told his disciples, **“Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many.”** At first glance, that might seem to be something we haven’t experienced. But in our time, there have been fringe teachers who claimed to be Jesus. Beyond that, any teacher who claims to speak for Jesus comes in his name. Any teacher who claims to show us the way to heaven is coming as if it were in Jesus’ name. So, any person who has taught a way to reach eternal life that’s different from Jesus dying and rising to give us life is one of the people Jesus told us would come. Church history shows again and again that he knew what he was talking about. Jesus also spoke of wars and rumors of wars. Right now, we’re fighting wars in two different countries. And how many other conflicts are going on throughout the world? You can say the same thing about the other signs that Jesus mentioned: the earthquakes and famines. How many earthquakes have there been just in the last few years? How many people are starving in Africa and in other parts of the world? All these signs have been fulfilled.

So does that mean that Jesus is coming back today? It certainly means that we must be ready for him to come back today. But listen to what Jesus says about these signs: **“Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.”** And, **“These are the beginning of birth pains.”** I’ve watched my wife go through birth pains, and you know what I’ve observed? They don’t stop until the baby comes. Now, they tend to speed up and be more intense as the baby gets closer. But they didn’t look fun even with they were twenty or thirty minutes apart. Birth *pains* seems like a good name for them. Jesus chose that comparison very carefully. Do you think that there was ever a moment in the history of the world when there were no wars or earthquakes or famines? Jesus gave the earthquakes and famines and wars that followed him a special significance: every one of them teaches us that he is coming back soon. But like birth pains, you don’t know from the beginning how long it will be until the end. Sometimes, that baby comes pretty quickly. But sometimes, labor lasts for a day or

longer. And there are moments of rest in between the contractions, right up until the end, when they're harder and more frequent.

Jesus gives us a picture of life in this world from the time that he left until he returns. There are times of relative peace, but wars never go away. Earthquakes and famines keep happening. But what about us here in Michigan? We haven't had a war here since the War of 1812. We're not near a fault line, so earthquakes don't hit us. I don't think we've ever had a famine here. So do these signs apply to us? They do. We may not have had a full scale famine here, but many families in Wayne County struggle to get enough food to eat and to keep a roof over their heads and to keep the heat on in the winter time. Economic chaos has caused many people in our neighborhoods to lose their homes. The peace and prosperity we've known just means we were between contractions.

Jesus is really talking about all the hardships that afflict us while we wait for him to come back. I saw a sign in the hospital the other day which said "At some time in our lives, we're all patients." I wanted to argue with it because I haven't been admitted to a hospital since I was five years old. But I was then. And I could be again. My body isn't going to get any younger than you see it right now and time is going to take its toll if I live long enough. All of us will be patients at some point. All of us will lose people we love. All of us will suffer hurt and loss in this life. All those terrible things teach us that Jesus is coming back.

God did not create the world to be like this. God created it to be perfect. All that suffering and hurt and hardship only happens because of our sin. On one level, all wars and conflicts, even most famines happen because sinners hurt each other. But beyond the injuries we inflict directly on each other, our sin breaks the world itself. It's the cause of earthquakes and tidal waves and famines. We who cause all that torment deserve hell. But Jesus came to pay for our sin that ruins this world. He died on the cross for all my contributions to the sufferings of others. He paid for every time we did or said anything that made another person's life harder. He rose and God declared us to be holy. So when we die, we will not go to hell. We will live in heaven.

But Jesus didn't just die for our souls so that we could float around on clouds in heaven. Jesus is going to raise our bodies – or if we're still alive when he comes, he's going to transform our bodies. He will make us new and perfect. He will set our hearts free from the sin that corrupts them so we'll never hurt ourselves or anyone else again. But what good would that do if we still had to live in a world that's full of wars and earthquakes and famines and illnesses and hardship? Jesus is not done until he sets the creation free from what sin has done to it. So every time we see pain and suffering on the news, every time we experience hardship in our own lives, God is showing us why Jesus is coming back. And the promise that he is coming back transforms all those hurts and sorrows into a reason to hope. Jesus will return and make all things new. And ever since he gave us that promise, the Church has been praying, "Come, Lord Jesus."

The Lutheran Reformation at its heart is proclaiming those promises of God to people who live in a world tormented by sin. Those birth pains will hit you, sooner or later. But when they come Jesus will be with you. He laid down his life to set you free from the sin that causes all that pain. He will carry you through the suffering this life brings. You will live with him in a better world to come. That's a message we all need to hear.

## II.

Just to put a finer point on what he was saying, Jesus zeroed in on one particular kind of suffering: persecution. The Church faces persecution in every age and in every place. Sometimes the birth pains are worse. Sometimes they're easier. But they're always there. God used Luther and the men who came after him to make sure that we have the gospel to carry us through whatever persecution we face. **Who needs the Reformation? You do because you will face persecution.**

Jesus warned the disciples that they would be handed over to the Jewish councils and flogged in the synagogues. They would be hauled before governors and kings to answer for their faith. All that did happen to them. But persecution continued long after they were gone. Luther had to answer for his faith before kings and princes. And many Christians before and since have endured trials whose verdict was decided before they began.

Now, I've never been arrested for my faith. I don't know anyone in Michigan who has been. It does happen today. Many Muslim countries make it a crime to preach the gospel to Muslims. Countries like China still take a pretty hard line approach to Christian outreach. But even some Western countries make it difficult to

proclaim the gospel. A few years ago, authorities in Sweden arrested a man for preaching that homosexuality is a sin. The case went all the way to the Swedish supreme court before the charges were dismissed.

But does persecution happen here? Yes it does. Under our constitution, we're free to proclaim our teachings and to build churches and to gather here. But that could change. And even if we don't lose our rights to gather and speak, we're already being shouted down. In my lifetime, this country has gone from being a country that thought of itself as basically Christian to being a country that is hostile to Christianity. Now, don't misunderstand me. I don't believe this country or any other country has ever been "a Christian nation." But there was a time in which the Church lived in relative peace here. Now it feels like the contractions are picking up. Late night comedy and mainstream television always make Bible believing Christians into judgment Bible thumpers. But Hinduism, Judaism, even Islam are almost always treated with respect. The media wants us to bend over backward and change what we believe to accept those false gods. So it's not at all surprising that people around us mock Christians and their faith. It's not being arrested or thrown to the lions. But it does hurt and it does make it harder for us and our children to remain faithful.

Why does God let that happen? Jesus said that the apostles would be dragged before governors and kings as a witness to them. That's still the case today. Every time anyone pressures us to keep our mouths shut, God is giving us an opportunity to speak the truth. Why does he do that? First of all, to convert unbelievers. Every believer started out as an unbeliever. God changed us by bringing the gospel to us. Every time someone ridicules our faith, God is giving the persecutor the chance to hear the message about Jesus. And even if they don't believe it, God still works through that message. At the very least, on Judgment Day, those who hear our testimony will have no excuse.

But that lays a heavy responsibility on us. We have to witness in those moments of persecution. How will we know what to say? We may not come up with something as memorable as "Here I stand!" Jesus said, **"Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit."** Now Jesus isn't telling us never to prepare to speak. We all need to study the Word regularly. I do need to prepare to preach to you on Sunday. But when those moments of crisis come, he works through the faith he put in our hearts and he gives us exactly what we need in the face of ridicule and persecution. We don't need to worry. Jesus will be there for us. He will defend his cause.

Who needs the Reformation? We do. We live in a world that sin torments. When those birth pains are fast and furious, we need the promises of Christ to carry us through. We need the Reformation because we live in a world that will always punish us for confessing the gospel. But that gospel is the power of God. It takes people who hate Jesus and turns them into servants of the word. It works in our hearts and prepares us so that when we have to confess, we have the wisdom only the Holy Spirit can give. The Lutheran Reformation is not about what happened 500 years ago. That's the history. But the Reformation is about what God does through Christ today and what he will do until the Lord returns. Amen.