

John 10.11-16
Misericordias domini / Here I Stand Sunday
18 April 2021
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Hallelujah! +

Hallelujah! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!

Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

A picture is worth a thousand words. And there you have it—an artist's rendition of that famous moment that we celebrate today, Luther's concluding words to his speech before the Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire on 18 April 1521: "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."

Today, this very day, is the 500th Anniversary of the utterance of those famous words. Much romanticized. Often taken as a cipher for things they couldn't possibly mean. It's the little guy sticking it to the man. An expression of freedom—freedom at last!—that kicked the modern era into gear and ultimately gave rise to the freedoms granted in the U.S. Bill of Rights. In Marxist East Germany, it was the bourgeois antithesis to the noble thesis that gave rise to a synthesis that crumbled when Soviet tanks rolled across the Polish border at the end of World War II and instituted brutal Communism.

But, fellow-redeemed, it was none of these.

In fact, it was quite something else. Something that the Romantics don't really know how to handle. Something that has as much to do with the shape of secular American freedoms as Caesar crossing the Rubicon. Something that was anything but a step in the march toward godless Communism.

For Luther appeared before the Emperor not with pluck, but in humility. Far from freely exercising an autonomous conscience, he spoke from a bound conscience—bound to God's Word. He stood before Kaiser and potentates of Reich and Church not to proclaim that God was dead, but very much alive. Christ's resurrected life, His proclamation to the entire world that sin's debt has been paid once for all by the death He died and that in His name alone is there life and salvation.

You know the history. On the Eve of All Saints 1517 Luther published the *95 Theses*. Whether he intended to set off a firestorm like he did or not really isn't the issue. He was just taking seriously his charge as a Doctor of the Church to teach God's truth.

By 1518, again, taking seriously his charge as a Doctor of the Church to teach the truth of God, what was beginning to become clear to Luther in 1517 had found crystal clarity through the light of God's Word: God's righteousness isn't something for humans to go after, to achieve. It wasn't a rope to climb into heaven or a high-jump bar to leap over. It was something God gave freely in Christ. That's exactly what Paul said in Romans 3[.21-22]: "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets [the Old Testament, that is] bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." Clarity.

And this clarity triggered a writing spree. The ink flew back and forth. Luther proclaiming this truth. His opponents attempting to refute it. And Luther going right back at it in the defense of this truth. By the

time he showed up at Worms in 1521, the papal nuncio was able to show him a stack of 25 books, all written by Luther, that were Exhibit A for his trial.

Meanwhile on 15 June 1520 Pope Leo had issued a bull—that's a fancy word for an official bulletin from the papacy. The bull was called *Exsurge, domine*, "Rise up, O Lord." It listed 41 points in which what Luther had written diverged from the teaching of the Church and fingered him as a heretic. Luther was given 60 days from the day it arrived in Wittenberg to recant. To retract his opinion. The bull arrived on 21 June. 20 August came and went. He didn't recant. And then on 10 December 1520, again in great humility and as a Doctor of the Church, he burned the bull and numerous other books filled with false doctrine in Wittenberg.

Now it's just a few months later, and things have really heated up. Luther has been declared a heretic and Lutheran teaching a heresy. Luther is to be taken on sight by anyone and everyone and burned at the stake. That's what canon law decrees. Papal legates have been sent to the Kaiser to get *him* to act. He's supposed to add the weight of imperial law to the decrees of canon law and place the resources of the entire Holy Roman Empire behind taking Luther dead or alive.

But Charles hit a snag. Imperial law forbade him from handing down a death sentence without a trial. So on 19 February 1521 he summoned Luther to an Imperial Diet at the city of Worms. Luther was to be given safe conduct, to "be heard through learned specialists, that is, he is to be asked whether he will abide with his writings and their content or not. Beyond that, nothing. There is to be no disputation. If he recants, he shall be treated with grace; if he remains obstinate, then the Kaiser's mandate against him will be executed" (Schwiebert, 496).

On 2 April Luther left Wittenberg for this prodigious meeting. His safe conduct was threatened several times, but he finally arrived two weeks later at Worms on 16 April. At four in the afternoon on the 17th he was summoned before the diet. Two questions and two questions only. Number One: are you the author of the books in this stack? Luther: Yes. Question Number Two: Are you ready to revoke the heresies that they contain? Luther: "Since it is a question of faith and the salvation of the soul, the affirmation or denial of God's Word, I'd like more time."

It's hard not to believe that in Luther's mind it was also a question of his own life. He was like a foreign intruder dragged before a North Korean interrogation squad. Some in the crowd were friends. Most not. And an imperial decree—a decree of death, no less—well, it's not easy to escape when soldiers guard the doors and the city's full of the Kaiser's retinue.

In any event, the time was granted. He had 24 more hours. He was to appear the next day, 18 April, at 4:00 p.m. Today, 500 years ago.

When he appeared before the Kaiser the next day he was given the same two questions, followed by an opportunity to speak. It took him a while to get his feet under himself. (I once got off a plan in Milan to an airport filled with Italian soldiers with machine guns—pointed at the stream of passengers getting off the plan. The shock still hasn't worn off.) Imagine a monk before all the power and might of the Holy Roman Empire on full display.

Once he got his feet under him he once again acknowledged his authorship of the 25 books stacked up there. That didn't change a bit.

But now the million-dollar question. He could find no way to retract his writings. They attacked, among other things, abuses in the church that everyone—even the people sitting there—acknowledged. Didn't a son of the church have a duty to help his mother? He argued. Of course, some of what he said was

harsh. For that he apologized. As for the rest, he pleaded that his errors be shown by plain Scripture and clear reason. As soon as they were, he'd retract them. But if what he said rested on God's Word, how could he fight against it and bring down on his own head "a frightful deluge of inextricable dangers, present disaster, and everlasting desolations"?

At that point he got interrupted and was asked to repeat the entire speech in Latin, which he did.

Then he concluded: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures and plain reason, I have been conquered by the Scriptures I have brought forward and my conscience has been taken captive in God's Words. I am neither able nor willing to recant anything since it is neither safe nor honest to deal contrary to conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen" (WA 7.838.4-8).

The Diet went into frenzy and was brought into parliamentary disorder. And Luther was able to begin the trip home before the "dead or alive" warrant was put into effect. There he was "kidnapped" by some men sent to rescue him by the Elector of Saxony, and the next few years he was kept in hiding in the Wartburg. The death warrant remained over his head.

So now you've heard the story. You've heard the threat. You've heard how he at first demurred over recanting the day before. Imagine the pains of being burned alive flashing through his nerves. All he needed to say was one word in Latin: *revoco*. But he didn't. Instead, he said, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."

What was going on? Just the pluck of the little guy sticking it to the man?

That's one way to look at it. The wrong way, of course.

Because Luther was above all a man of God's Word.

Easter 1521 fell on 3 April. On the 17th, just the day before he uttered those famous words, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen." He had attended Mass. And that Sunday was *this* Sunday—*Misericordias domini*.

He of course listened to the Epistle:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Then he listened to the Gospel:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and

I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

That's the Lord and God Luther had. A saving God. One who by His own death defeats all death. To Luther death was the doorway to eternal life. As it is to you. If only you could hold on to *that* God, what would you *not* suffer?

Beloved in the Lord: the lives of the saints—even of St. Martin of Wittenberg, for all his faults—are set before us examples. Take his example to heart. Cling to Christ, *your* Good Shepherd, and never let Him go. And be bold to confess His name. For by His wounds you have been healed. By Him your sins have been forgiven. By Him your death has been overcome by His. And you are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.

Amen.

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