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Our Saviour Lutheran Church  
Reformation Sunday  
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, the other day the Lutheran pastors in the greater Harrisburg area met as we usually do each month.

And during that meeting, one of the pastors in attendance, one of my colleagues mentioned a figure that was quite sobering.

He said that mainline Christian denominations, including the Lutheran Church...

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In other words, Lutherans and other mainline denominations are not very good at keeping people in their denominations, and this is particularly true of young people.

He said that according to PEW Research, 45% of persons who were in our churches as children, didn't stay with their religious tradition into adulthood.

These persons either went to worship elsewhere, such as to Evangelical Churches or what's worse, decided to abandon the institution of the Church altogether.

"Why?" We might wonder. "Why do young people and even those who are not so young leave their church?"

Now, my colleague who shared this number from PEW Research, my colleague who share this with myself and the other pastors in our conference...

My colleague suggested that the cause has to do with the fact that Christianity can be seen by many as proclaiming a "fairy tale" of sorts.

The idea that long, long ago a man was born of a virgin...

And was then crucified and was raised from the dead...

...whose death and resurrection can somehow answer for our sins and promise us eternal life...

...seems all too far-fetched for many, especially in light of science and technology and the whole Age of Enlightenment.

My colleague suggested that Christianity's "fairy tale" is just too hard to swallow.

And it is at college, when young people are exposed to whole host of philosophies and ideologies...at college where young people are taught to think critically, it is as college that young people experience a crisis of faith.

At college many young people start to question the so-called "fairy tale" they were brought up to believe.

Or, if not at college, individuals question the tenets of Christianity because the experiences of life, the experiences of hardship, of trial, of grief and suffering, pokes holes into one's belief system, and makes individuals doubt what they have been taught, that God is all-powerful, that God is in control.

Yes, there is often a crisis of faith that challenges the belief system of many individuals.

Many people butt up against a crisis of faith and many people abandon the religious tradition of their upbringing, 45% of persons according to PEW Research.

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Now, I don't doubt that what my colleague suggests about Christianity being seen as a "fairy tale" plays a role in the loss of members.

I don't doubt that, higher thinking, critical thinking, and even the trials of everyday life play a role in upsetting the faith applecart for people.

I believe there is a great amount of validity in that assessment.

But I also believe that there is another reason why 45% of young people fall away from their religious tradition.

And that is because we fail to teach people how to claim the Faith for themselves.

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Now, what does that mean? To claim the Faith for themselves.

Well, it means that individuals need to be able to examine their beliefs.

Individuals need to be able to scrutinize what they have been taught.

Individuals need to be able to analyze, dissect, study, and otherwise explore the teachings they've learned.

You see, so often, we teach the Bible, we teach the Faith of the Church, as though to say, "This is what you need to know. Trust me. You'll be a better person for it, just sit there quietly, absorb what I am telling you, and go on your way."

But then what happens when there is a crisis of faith?

What happens when science punches holes in the teachings of the Faith?

What happens when critical thinking takes over and a person wonders how this so-called "fairy tale" can be true?

What happens when life throws a curve ball and we doubt God's power over all things, or we doubt that God is in control?

Well, what happens is that if we haven't given a person the tools to navigate this crisis of Faith, that person might very well decide to go outside the Faith to find their sense of "truth."

We read the words from our gospel today, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free," and we can't help but wonder if many young persons feel this way when they are suddenly confronted with an alternative to the so-called "fairy tale."

That they feel "freed" from the Faith of their upbringing. That the light shed on Christianity and its so-called fairy tale has set them free.

No doubt persons feel liberated when told they can believe something else than the Faith of their parents and grandparents.

Yes, we wonder if many young people feel they are freed when this occurs, and it can't help but sadden us.

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And so, we need to help people claim the Faith for themselves, as opposed to giving persons the Faith according to us their parents and grandparents and saying, “Accept this and you’ll be fine.”

We need to tell persons that they will likely face a crisis of faith, or even several crises of faith, and we need to provide tools to them to help navigate those times in life.

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In some respect, I think, this is what the Reformation was about—claiming the Faith for one’s self.

You see, Martin Luther had been brought up to believe a certain way about the Church of his day.

He was taught to believe that an individual was to see one’s self as never good enough in the eyes of God, and that an individual had to strive and strive and strive some more to work off one’s sins if a person even dared hope to experience the blessings of heaven.

And even after the hardship of life, a person believed they would have to endure purgatory, where a person had to continue to work off one’s sins for who knows how long, until that person could finally enter the gates of Paradise.

And so, the faith journey was an absolute bleak experience.

And Luther tormented himself early in life, trying to make himself right with God, striving to rid himself of sin. He confessed his sins for hours on end.

He flogged himself, whipped himself trying to discipline his life.

He did everything he could to make himself worthy.

But then through his study, through his intense examination of the Faith and the Bible, through his scrutiny of what he had been taught, he came to a new understanding.

In essence, he claimed the Faith for himself, and it was an earth shaking moment for him.

It radically changed his perspective and it led to maybe the greatest movement in human history, known as the Reformation.

And why the Reformation had such an impact, I believe, is because in his own claiming of Faith, Luther helped others see that they could claim the Faith for themselves.

That individuals need not, and in fact dared not, blindly accept the Faith they had been taught, but that they could claim the Faith for themselves.

This is also why Luther no doubt translated the Bible into German, so that people could read the Word of God for themselves, and interpret and understand it for themselves.

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And when Luther claimed the Faith for himself, he said it was as though he walked through the Gates of Paradise itself.

He discovered for himself that God did not require a person to make him- or herself worthy before God, but God made each and every person worthy already through the gift of his Son Jesus Christ, and it was then only simple matter of accepting this truth by faith.

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

That was Luther's truth, and it made him free. It made a lot of people free.

The truth that is God's grace in Jesus Christ has been the truth for many Christians for centuries, even down to our present day.

But why then, we ask, if this is such a profound truth, why do so many people turn away from the Faith of the Lutheran Church, and other mainline denominations who share this truth, why do so many turn away, upwards of 45% so says PEW Research?

Why indeed? Except that we have not helped people, we have not empowered people to scrutinize the Faith, to navigate through the challenges posed to the Faith.

We have not helped people so as to navigate the crises of faith, and so to help persons emerge on the other side, with their faith still intact, but perhaps a bit nuanced, perhaps a bit re-imagined, perhaps a bit made over to fit that particular person.

In church, in Sunday School, in Bible study, we give people the foundation they need, but people need to be able to don the Faith to fit them, like a suit that is tailored, like a suit that is altered.

It is still a suit. It is still the Faith. Yes a faith that is claimed by one's self fits much better than a hand-me-down faith.

So then, we are all wondering, "How do we go about helping people claim the Faith for themselves?" How do we do that?

We were talking about this very question in Adult Sunday School a couple weeks back when we were studying the Book of Job.

And the Book of Job is unique in that the character Job, who is described as utterly blameless and upright, faces a huge crisis faith when he loses his children, his wealth and property, and his very health.

But through it all, his faith in God never wavers, and that which carries Job through his crisis of faith, that which allows him to navigate his crisis of faith is Job's inquisitorial nature.

In short, he asks questions, he in effect puts God on trial, wanting to know why he has suffered.

And although Job doesn't get a straight up answer, other than God saying, "I am God and you are not, and you can't begin to understand my ways..."

Even though Job doesn't get a straight up answer, the process of questioning the Faith he has known allows him to emerge on the other side of his crisis with his faith intact.

It is okay to ask questions. It is okay to question what we believe. To ask why. To scrutinize our faith. It is almost expected that one can get upset with God, and challenge God.

Even our Lord demanded from God an explanation of his sense of abandonment when he was on the cross, yelling, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

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In my own life, which now spans 50 years, almost half of that as an ordained minister, I have at times had various crises of faith.

In my own life, I have questioned and examined my Faith, and certain long-held assumptions about my faith I have had to let go at various time.

Some of those assumptions of faith I jettisoned gladly.

But one inscrutable truth I continue to return to and will let go lightly is this.

If I continue in God's word, if I continue to follow Jesus, I will know the truth, and the truth will set me free.

In other words, even though I may scrutinize what I have learned in the faith...

Even though I may challenge what I have known...

I still filter it through the Word of God, I still follow Jesus, I still try to love my neighbor, I still try to live according to will of God...

And so, whatever understanding of the truth I do claim, that truth still must fall under the umbrella of God's truth.

This was true of what Luther did during the Reformation.

Luther did not go outside God's Word when it came to his new understanding of faith.

He tested all his insights through the Word of God. He grounded his understanding of the Faith in God's Word.

So, even though we need to claim the Faith for ourselves, our viewpoint of the Faith still needs to be consistent with God's Word.

So our questions and our scrutiny of the Faith which we have learned from those who came before us, and those insights we gain from our study and examination, should ultimately fall within the Word of God.

If we continue in God's Word, and we continue as God's disciples, we will know the truth as our own, and the truth will set us free.

Thanks be to God. Amen.