

Psalm 46
October 23, '11

“BIOGRAPHY AS THEOLOGY: MARTIN LUTHER”

(Before scripture)

FOR MANY YEARS, I HAVE MADE USE OF TWO LITTLE-KNOWN BOOKS THAT HAVE ALWAYS FASCINATED ME.

THE BOOKS ARE SIMILAR IN BOTH THEIR FOCUS & THEIR CONTENT.

ONE IS ENTITLED THE WORD OF GOD ACROSS THE AGES AND THE OTHER SERVES AS PART OF THE TITLE OF THE SERMONS FOR THE NEXT TWO WEEKS – BIOGRAPHY AS THEOLOGY.

THE AUTHORS WOULD PROBABLY GRIMACE AT THIS BUT I WOULD SUGGEST THE FOCUS OF EACH BOOK CAN BE SUMMED UP LIKE THIS: “*THE WAY A PERSON LIVES TELLS YOU A GREAT DEAL ABOUT WHAT THEY BELIEVE.*”

THAT MAY NOT NECESSARILY BE WHAT THAT PERSON SAYS THEY BELIEVE.

THERE MAY BE A GREAT DISCREPANCY THERE.

I THINK THAT STATEMENT SHOULD CAUSE US TO EXAMINE OUR OWN LIVES AND SEE IF THERE IS CONSISTENCY IS WHAT WE SAY *WE BELIEVE* AND HOW WE LIVE OUR LIVES.

IF THERE'S NOT – SOMETHING SHOULD CHANGE.

IF THERE'S NOT CONSISTENCY IN WHAT YOU SAY YOU BELIEVE AND HOW YOU'RE LIVING YOUR LIFE, YOU SHOULD EITHER CHANGE YOUR BELIEFS OR CHANGE THE WAY YOU LIVE.

I IMAGINE MOST OF US, UPON SUCH AN EXAMINATION, WOULD DO WELL TO DO SOME ADJUSTING TO OUR LIVES RATHER THAN OUR STATED BELIEFS.

AS WE EMBARK UPON THIS LITTLE TWO-WEEK SERIES WE'VE LABELLED “BIOGRAPHY AS THEOLOGY,” IT'S APPROPRIATE THAT IT BE CENTERED ON A PARTICULAR PERIOD OF HISTORY FOR A COUPLE REASONS.

FIRST OF ALL, NEXT SUNDAY IS REFORMATION SUNDAY & THE TWO INDIVIDUALS ON WHOM WE WILL FOCUS WERE GIANTS OF THAT TUMULTUOUS & CATAclysmic PERIOD IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH.

NEXT WEEK, WE'LL LOOK AT ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL VOICES OF OUR OWN PRESBYTERIAN TRADITION – JOHN KNOX OF SCOTLAND.

TODAY, AND THE SECOND REASON IT'S APPROPRIATE TO FOCUS ON THAT PERIOD OF HISTORY, OUR FOCUS WILL BE ON MARTIN LUTHER AS A FOLLOW-UP TO LAST NIGHT'S MAGNIFICENT PROGRAM HERE.

OUR SCRIPTURE READING FOR THIS MORNING WAS THE BASIS FOR LUTHER'S GREATEST HYMN & THE FOCUS OF WHAT WE HEARD LAST NIGHT – PSALM 46.

(After scripture)

MARTIN LUTHER WAS UNQUESTIONABLY THE MOST INFLUENTIAL INDIVIDUAL DURING ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PERIODS OF HUMAN HISTORY.

HE WAS ALSO ONE OF THE MOST TROUBLED SOULS WHO EVER LIVED.

LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT HOW THOSE TWO THINGS COME TOGETHER.

FIRST OF ALL, AS A WAY OF LOOKING AT LUTHER AS A PRIME EXAMPLE OF “BIOGRAPHY AS THEOLOGY,” THE GREAT CHURCH HISTORIAN, JUSTO GONZALEZ STATES THAT, “*MARTIN LUTHER IS ONE OF THOSE THINKERS WHOSE THEOLOGY IS SO BOUND UP WITH HIS LIFE THAT ONE CANNOT UNDERSTAND ONE APART FROM THE OTHER.*”

HIS FATHER WANTED HIM TO PRACTICE LAW BUT MARTIN WAS FAR MORE INTERESTED IN THEOLOGY. HE STRUGGLED MIGHTILY WITH WHAT GOD DEMANDED OF HIM.

ONE EVENING, WHILE STILL A LAW STUDENT, HE WAS RETURNING TO THE UNIVERSITY AFTER A VISIT WITH HIS PARENTS.

HE RODE INTO A SEVERE THUNDERSTORM BUT HE WAS OBLIVIOUS TO THE RAIN, THE THUNDER & THE LIGHTNING BECAUSE HE WAS WRESTLING WITH ANOTHER STORM THAT WAS RAGING IN HIS SOUL.

HE HAD INTENDED TO INFORM HIS FATHER THAT HE SIMPLY COULDN'T CONTINUE HIS LAW STUDIES BUT HIS FATHER WAS SO PROUD OF HIM THAT HE COULDN'T BRING HIMSELF TO BREAK THE NEWS.

SUDDENLY, HIS THOUGHTS WERE SHATTERED BY A BOLT OF LIGHTNING THAT KNOCKED HIM FROM HIS HORSE.

IN TERROR, HE CRIED OUT, “*SAINT ANNA, HELP ME & I WILL BECOME A MONK.*”

HE RETURNED TO THE UNIVERSITY, GAVE ONE LAST PARTY FOR HIS FRIENDS & TWO WEEKS LATER, MUCH TO HIS FATHER'S DISGUST & DISAPPROVAL, HE ENTERED A MONASTERY.

HIS INNER STRUGGLES CONTINUED, THOUGH, AS HE SOUGHT GOD'S APPROVAL.

IF THE 7 PRAYERS A DAY THAT WERE EXPECTED WERE GOOD, THEN 14 SHOULD BE EVEN BETTER.

IF ONE DAY'S FAST SHOULD HELP, 3 DAYS OF FASTING WOULD BE PREFERABLE.

HIS FELLOW MONKS WOULD FREQUENTLY FIND HIM ON THE COLD FLOOR OF HIS CELL, NAKED & UNCONSCIOUS AFTER SEVERAL HOURS OF SELF-DENIAL & PRAYER.

AT CONFESSION, HE LISTED EVERY MINUTE SIN.

FINALLY, HIS CONFESSOR REMARKED, HALF-JOKINGLY, “*STOP ALL THESE PETTY CONFESSIONS – NEXT TIME, SEE THAT YOU HAVE SOME GOOD, JUICY SIN TO CONFESS!*”

HIS MENTOR EVENTUALLY LED HIM INTO TEACHING.

ULTIMATELY, ON SOME UNKNOWN DAY, WHILE READING THE WORDS OF ROMANS 1:17, “*THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH,*” MARTIN LUTHER CAME TO DISCOVER THAT A MERCIFUL & LOVING GOD JUSTIFIES US BY FAITH – THAT OUR FAITH IN CHRIST BRINGS US RECONCILIATION SO THAT OUR SIN NO LONGER SEPARATES US FROM GOD.

LUTHER WROTE – “*THERE I BEGAN TO UNDERSTAND THAT THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IS THAT BY WHICH THE RIGHTEOUS LIVES BY A GIFT OF GOD, NAMELY BY FAITH...HERE I FELT THAT I WAS ALTOGETHER BORN AGAIN, AND HAD ENTERED PARADISE ITSELF THROUGH OPEN GATES.*”

IT WAS THAT DISCOVERY THAT EVENTUALLY LED HIM TO CHALLENGE THE CHURCH & ITS TEACHINGS AND CULMINATED IN HIS WELL-KNOWN SPEECH BEFORE CHURCH AUTHORITIES WHO DEMANDED THAT HE REPUDIATE HIS TEACHINGS & WRITINGS.

HE MAY – OR MAY NOT – HAVE SAID, “*HERE I STAND – I CAN DO NO OTHER.*”

BUT, UNQUESTIONABLY, HE SAID, *"I AM CAPTIVE TO THE WORD OF GOD."*

IT'S INTERESTING, ISN'T IT, HOW WE LONG FOR FREEDOM & YET FIND OUR TRUEST FREEDOM ONLY WHEN WE ARE IN CAPTIVITY – AND ONLY WHEN WE ARE IN CAPTIVITY TO JESUS CHRIST.

THAT ENCOUNTER WITH CHURCH LEADERS WAS IN 1517 & YET IT WASN'T THE END – BUT REALLY THE BEGINNING OF MARTIN LUTHER'S STRUGGLES.

HIS STRUGGLES WEREN'T ONLY WITH CHURCH AUTHORITIES.

HE ENDURED AN INNER STRUGGLE THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE IN HIS EFFORTS TO BE FAITHFUL TO THE CLAIM OF CHRIST UPON HIS LIFE.

A FULL DECADE AFTER THAT EXPERIENCE WHERE HE DECLARED THAT HE WAS CAPTIVE TO THE WORD OF GOD, MARTIN LUTHER CONTINUED TO FACE INNER TURMOIL IN HIS LIFE.

SURELY, HE'S NOT ALONE IN THAT REGARD.

THE APOSTLE PAUL EXPERIENCED IT AS WELL.

HE WROTE TO THE CORINTHIANS OF BEING *"...HARASSED AT EVERY TURN...CONFLICTS ON THE OUTSIDE, FEARS WITHIN."*

SOME 500 YEARS LATER, ST. MAKARIOS OF EGYPT SAID, VERY BLUNTLY, *"I AM CONVINCED THAT NOT EVEN THE APOSTLES, ALTHOUGH FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT, WERE THEREFORE COMPLETELY FREE FROM ANXIETY...CONTRARY TO THE STUPID VIEW EXPRESSED BY SOME, THE ADVENT OF GRACE DOES NOT MEAN THE IMMEDIATE DELIVERANCE FROM ANXIETY."*

A THOUSAND YEARS LATER, A NEAR CONTEMPORARY OF LUTHER'S – JOHN OF THE CROSS – MADE FAMOUS A PHRASE THAT HAS PASSED INTO OUR EVERYDAY LANGUAGE – *"THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL."*

EVEN IN OUR OWN DAY, SOMEONE AS HIGHLY REVERED AS MOTHER TERESA EXPRESSED SUCH A STRUGGLE.

SHE DESCRIBES WHAT SHE EXPERIENCED OF THE SEEMING ABSENCE OF GOD IN HER LIFE IN A VARIETY OF WAYS – AN EMPTINESS, LONELINESS, PAIN, SPIRITUAL DRYNESS OR LACK OF CONSOLATION.

AT ONE POINT, SHE WROTE, *"THERE IS SO MUCH CONTRADICTION IN MY SOUL, NO FAITH, NO LOVE, NO ZEAL...I FIND NO WORDS TO EXPRESS THE DEPTHS OF THE DARKNESS..."*

IF YOU CAN RELATE TO SUCH FEELINGS, TAKE COMFORT IN THE FACT THAT YOU ARE IN VERY SELECT COMPANY.

IT IS SAID THAT 1527 WAS THE YEAR OF MARTIN LUTHER'S DEEPEST DEPRESSION.

IT WAS DURING THAT TIME, HE WOULD OFTEN SAY TO HIS GOOD FRIEND & GIANT OF THE REFORMATION IN HIS OWN RIGHT, PHILIP MELANCHTHON, *"LET US SING PSALM 46."*

IT WAS ALSO DURING THAT TIME – OR SHORTLY THEREAFTER – THAT MARTIN LUTHER WROTE HIS GREATEST HYMN – BASED ON THAT PSALM.

IT HAS BEEN SUGGESTED THAT LUTHER'S THREE GREATEST LEGACIES ARE THE UNDERSTANDING OF SALVATION BY GRACE, PUTTING THE BIBLE INTO THE HANDS OF THE PEOPLE AND "A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD."

ACCORDING TO LUTHER, WE SHOULDN'T EXPECT THAT WE WILL BE SPARED "THE FLOOD OF MORTAL ILLS PREVAILING."

WE CAN, HOWEVER, EXPECT TO EXPERIENCE A DEEP SECURITY IN THE ASSURANCE THAT – HOWEVER MUCH THE EARTH SHAKES - A MORE POWERFUL GOD IS WITH US ALWAYS.

IF WE REMAIN CAPTIVE TO JESUS CHRIST, THAT TRUTH WILL ABIDE & WE WILL EXPERIENCE GOD'S ETERNAL KINGDOM FOREVER. AMEN.

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