

April 18, 2021 – Acts 3:11-21

April 18, 1521 was an important day in the history of the Christian Church, Lutheran and otherwise. It was the culmination of months of backroom political wheeling and dealing between Duke Frederick the Wise and Emperor Charles V. The result of a full day of legal maneuvering by Martin Luther's advisors and lawyer. And the end of a lengthy back and forth exchange between Luther himself and the papal prosecutor.

But finally, the moment that everyone had been waiting for came. The emperor was sick of all the delays and all the empty speeches. Interrupting the court, in a complete breach of protocol, he shouted at Luther, “Just give us a simple answer! Do you recant?”

Luther gathered his courage and gave the reply that everyone was expecting, and yet still shocked the audience: “Unless I am convinced by Scripture and by plain reason, and not by Popes and councils who have so often contradicted themselves, my conscience is captive to the Word of God. To go against conscience is neither right nor safe. I cannot and I will not recant. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.”

500 years ago today, the Diet of Worms marked a turning point in the Lutheran Reformation. In fact, more than a few Lutheran scholars would say that it represents a far better anniversary for the Reformation than the posting of the 95 Theses. Don't get me wrong... the 95 Theses were important. They were Luther's first public objection to the practices of the Roman Catholic Church. But they were limited in scope.

Whereas, the theological works that Luther refused to recant at the Diet of Worms represented a complete overhaul of Roman Catholic doctrine. They were a true attempt to reform the church. And Luther's refusal to recant was a refusal to obey a direct order from both the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor. Under most circumstances, his reply that day would have been a death sentence.

But what really infuriated Luther's opponents was not simply his insubordination. It was his arrogance. “Unless **I** am convinced by Scripture and by plain reason... **my** conscience is captive to the Word of God... Here **I** stand. **I** can do no other. God help **me**.”

To which they responded, “Who are you? You're just one man. What makes you think that you know better than the whole church?” It's a fair point. And, in fact, Luther himself struggled with that very question. He talked about it with his colleagues often. “How is it that I can see something that is so plain to me, so obvious, and yet, something that none of my opponents seem to be able to grasp?”

It just goes to show, though, that sometimes Jesus isn't as plain to see for others as he is for us. Sometimes the Gospel isn't as obvious as we think it is. And Luther wasn't the first to have that problem. Our first reading for today deals with that very same issue.

Here we have Peter and John in the days immediately after Pentecost. They are still in Jerusalem, walking into the Temple for prayer, when they come across a man who is paralyzed begging by the gate. They turn to him and he thinks they're going to give him some money.

But they don't. Instead, Peter looks him in the eye and says, “I don't have any silver or gold. I have something better. In the name of Jesus Christ, get up and walk.” And immediately, not only is the man no longer paralyzed, his legs and ankles become as strong as if had never been paralyzed. He gets up and begins leaping into the air, praising God for his miraculous healing.

Now, there was a whole crowd of people there who had gathered for prayer and they all see this. And they are absolutely astounded. Peter, on the other hand, just rolls his eyes at their reaction. And he tells them, “We didn't do this by our own power. Don't look at us in amazement. We did this in the name of Jesus.”

“You know, the same Jesus who did this exact kind of healing for three years in your midst. The same Jesus who revealed God's glory to you on countless occasions. The same Jesus who was nothing but Holy and Righteous among you.”

“And he'd be here right now, continuing to heal you. Except that, for some incomprehensible reason, you denied him and handed him over to Pilate and insisted that Pilate crucify him and not a convicted murderer. And you killed the Author of Life! What were you thinking?!”

OK, he doesn't actually say that last part. But I'm quite certain he was thinking it. But I also notice that Peter uses an interesting choice of words there. “*Whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate.*” Peter knows a thing or two about denying Jesus.

And so rather than condemn them for their sins even more, he backs off. He tells them that God raised Jesus from the dead. That it's by his name – by faith in his name – that this man has been healed.

And he gives them a surprising measure of grace. They acted in ignorance when they crucified Jesus, they and their leaders. Despite all the evidence presented to them by Jesus' teaching and miracles. Despite all the prophecies that Jesus fulfilled. Despite all of scripture pointing to his death and resurrection and ascension.

They acted in ignorance. But the time of ignorance is over. And the time of repentance has come. They can't claim ignorance anymore. Their sins have been laid bare before them. If it wasn't plain to see before, it has to be now, that they were wrong to do what they did.

But the good news is that Jesus did what he did that their sins might be blotted out. He died on the cross that they may have times of refreshing in the presence of the Lord. Even though it was utterly obvious to everyone – Peter, the disciples, every person who ever heard Jesus speak – God still forgives. Jesus still saves.

That was Luther's attitude that day standing before the Emperor. He didn't want to see the church torn apart by schism and warfare. That was never his goal. Never his desire.

He just wanted the church to see what he saw. To see a Gospel message that was now so obvious to him. To stop putting their faith in popes and indulgences and corrupt men seeking money and power. And put their faith in the name of Jesus alone to forgive and save.

He wanted to see the church repent of its errors and receive a time of refreshing in the presence of the Lord. And he was willing to put his own life on the line for that to happen. Thankfully, God protected him. God surrounded him with others who saw what Luther saw and gave him the support he needed. So that he could continue his work for another 25 years.

Today, we face a similar challenge. We live in a community where a great many people grew up in the church. In our congregation. They were baptized. They went to Sunday School. Some were even confirmed. If you ask them if they're a Christian, they might even say yes.

God's Word is obvious to them. They've heard it. They know it. But they don't care anymore. They're like those people in Peter's day. Watching what Jesus did and yet still surprised to find that he was the Christ. They're like those people in Luther's day. Knowing God's Word and yet clinging to everything except Jesus for salvation.

They need a Peter to stand before them and say, “*Repent and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out.*” They need a Luther to stand before them and say, “I will not recant what Scripture says, no matter how many people may try to make me. For it is the power of God unto salvation.” They need someone to proclaim the resurrection to them.

That you may know no matter what you think or what you've done, Jesus still lives. He is the Author of Life and faith in his name brings life. And nothing can take that life away.

Luther refused to recant not because he was arrogant, but because he loved those who opposed him. He loved his enemies. And he wanted them to see the Gospel that he had seen.

Today, we reach out to those who oppose us. To those who have wandered from the flock. To those for whom the truth should be obvious, but isn't. We reach out to them with the message of Jesus Christ. Not because we're arrogant, but because we love them.

We love them with the love that the Father has given to us. The love that makes us children of God. Amen.