

494 years ago tomorrow, on All Hallows Eve, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church in Germany and thus began the Protestant Reformation. The only church of Luther’s day was the Roman Catholic Church, and it was a much different Roman Catholic Church than the one we know today.

It was Luther, this studious, devoted Catholic, who defied his father’s wish that he become a lawyer and instead became a monk, who spent his life studying, defending, and refining his understanding of God’s Word. It was this man, Luther, from whom we inherit our access to the Bible. It was Luther, who while hidden away for his own protection for two years, translated the Bible from Latin to German so that ordinary German people could read it for themselves.

Luther was a protester interested in reforming catholicism; thus, the term Protestant Reformation, but once Pandora’s Box was opened, more happened to the church than mere reformation. This began the Protestant churches from which we trace our church ancestry.

The opening words of the document he nailed to the church that October 31, 1517 begins this way: “Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following propositions will be discussed at Wittenberg.” Today I want to talk about God’s Word revealed in three different ways.

The first is God’s word in Holy Scriptures. Because today we are so inundated with printed material, it is difficult for us to even imagine what an inspired masterpiece the Hebrew scriptures represents. Over a span of 500 years, Israel was moved by the spirit to record and compile powerful stories of their encounters with God.

They knew that God’s Word possessed profound power, and to read and study the Torah was to tap into God’s power that could change their lives. The Jewish Holocaust survivor and writer Elie Wiesel, was a typical 12 year old Jewish boy living in Transylvania in 1941; he writes that his whole days were spent studying the sacred texts. To be a faithful Jew meant to have a reverence for the scriptures and to read and study them with an obsession.

Wiesel tells a story from the Talmud. We might compare the Jewish Talmud to our commentaries. This story was about a great rabbi being burned at the stake for teaching the Torah in public. “The Romans wrapped him in the sacred scrolls of the Torah and set them afire. His disciples asked him. ‘Master, what do you see?’ He told them: ‘I see the parchment burning but the letters are floating in the air. For the letters cannot be destroyed...’”(Wiesel, from *The Kingdom of Memory*, p. 29). Israel believed in a transcendent power of the Word which could not be destroyed.

The Bible tells us where we came from; it is our religious family tree. It might be compared to a genogram which is a diagram outlining the chronology of a family and how each family member relates to the others. Genograms are used to see the past in ways that can inform the present. For example, if a genogram shows that several ancestors died of alcoholism, it tells one that alcohol might be a good thing to stay far, far away from. By looking at our spiritual family of origins and its stories that are part of this biblical genogram, we more clearly understand who we are as people of God today.

God’s Word found new expressions in the Christian scriptures and through the life and message of Jesus. In John’s gospel, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” So we have God’s word as revealed in

scripture and revealed through Christ, and finally, we also have God's Word revealed to us through human experience.

On this Reformation Sunday, we remember God's word revealed through Martin Luther. It's hard for us to imagine what was at stake for Martin Luther when he nailed those 95 complaints to the Wittenberg Church 494 years ago. Luther was excommunicated from the Catholic Church for his protest, and there was no other church to go to. It wasn't an option to become disgruntled with the UCC and join up with the Presbyterians down the street. What's more, in Luther's day church and state were one and the same. To be excommunicated from the church was to be a criminal. Luther had everything to lose, including his life! But his conscience gave him the courage to take a stand against even the church which he believed denied the truth of both scripture and Christ.

When Luther was given one last chance to recant his writings, he said what have now become the famous words: "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me." It may be that we will be called to do something big, to be brave like our brother Luther.

Some of us had the opportunity to attend the Brave New Planet Conference this past Friday and Saturday. I think it's safe to say that we were all inspired! Sometimes we felt like crying; sometimes like shouting alleluias! But we definitely felt renewed in our commitment to love this creation that God so loves and to do all we can to sustain life on earth including human life. Our voices imitate Luther's proclamation of "Here we stand, we can do no other." Our God-given task of the stewardship of creation which we read about in Genesis is a great work for our time, perhaps THE great work of our time. It calls us to another great reformation which I believe will draw us closer to the heart of God.

Like prophets of old called God's people to reform their ways, many prophetic voices from faith and science have been calling us back to care for creation. Science has told us that the safe number of carbon in our atmosphere is 350 parts per million and we are now at 392. We are seeing the results of exceeding this tipping point in the extreme weather patterns of recent years.

So we are called, like Luther long ago, to be brave, to do something big, to think about what creation needs, to honor our God given work of the stewardship of the earth.

May we find courage in knowing that God is always with us offering God's self through scripture, in and through Jesus Christ, and through the witnesses of the faithful through the ages. May we be brace and join the chorus of those who've risked everything to say: "Here we stand; we can do not other; God help us!"