

Reformation Sunday • October 30, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Romans 3:19-28

"Shelter"

Be afraid. Be very afraid.

October 31 is Reformation Day, though I think we can safely say that most of the people in our country think of something else that comes that day: All Hallows' Eve. There's a lot that's going on around Halloween. If you're going out to trick-or-treat or spend time with friends at a suitably scary party, you've got to get a costume together. If you're staying home, you might be stocking up on candy to give out as visitors drop by your door. One of my friends would decorate his family's home for Halloween each year, going all-out to make it frighteningly entertaining – or entertainingly frightening. Fog machines produced clouds that blanketed the ground. Great cracks of thunder boomed out to accompany flashes of lightning from the trees and roof. The carved pumpkins in the yard didn't just sit around, fed by a tiny votive candle; no, these pumpkins could shoot propane-fueled flames from their faces! And in order to get candy, trick-or-treaters would have to overcome their growing fear to approach the porch, which had been decorated to resemble a mausoleum, and find one more shocking surprise waiting to make them scream.

People seem to like scaring themselves, especially around Halloween. We've invented all kinds of monsters – vampires and werewolves and zombies – creatures who lurk in the shadows to make us shiver on a long, dark night. People go to "haunted houses" for the excitement of frights and shrieks they might find waiting around each corner. Friends gather around the campfire to tell ghost stories and give each other goosebumps. As a child, did you ever watch a scary movie or hear a spooky tale, only to come awake in the middle of the night, the darkness all around you, and hide under your blanket, confident that it could protect you from the boogeyman that waited out there where you couldn't see? Be afraid. Be very afraid. At their root, though, all of these eerie or terrifying inventions are just "safe scares," tales and experiences that people have made up over time to thrill and entertain – and distract.

Sure, there's a lot of fake scary stuff out there this time of year. But of what are you *really* afraid? We tell tales of ghostly apparitions and horrific monsters to take our minds off of those real things that would really make us cry out and run away. There's a reason that people are afraid of the dark, of those things that go bump in the night: You can't see what's out there; you're powerless to save yourself from it. What's out there in the dark for you right now? You might not see it, but you know that it's out there, waiting for you. You might feel powerless against it. And when you're powerless, you should be afraid – very afraid.

No matter who you are, there's a two-headed monster lurking out there in the dark, and no blanket can shelter you from it. The people of Martin Luther's day were very aware of it, and feared it: the specter of sin and death. Life was neither as safe nor as long as we know it today. People did whatever they could to protect themselves from God's wrath, because they knew that they could die at any time. They knew that they needed God's forgiveness. They tried to work for it, thinking that by doing the right things they could get on God's good side. People would even try to buy God's mercy through the purchase of "indulgences" – marketed as something like gift certificates for forgiveness – a practice that prompted Luther and the other reformers to question why the church was teaching such things. Instead of pointing to the Savior who would deliver them from sin and death, the church was just selling the people blankets under which they'd think themselves safe. Neither good works nor their indulgences would save them from what was lurking out there in the dark.

God's Word today is clear: you, too, are powerless. You can't save yourself. It doesn't matter what good things you say or do, you can't get yourself free any more than the people of Luther's time could. You need shelter. But from what? Or from Whom?

Ultimately, you need shelter *from God*. As St. Paul reminds us, "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" God is holy, and you and I are not. You should be afraid, very afraid. You should be afraid of a holy God, like Luther was afraid – **afraid not because God is evil, but because you are not holy**, and no matter how many nice things you do or say, no matter what you might do to distract yourself from the reality of your situation, no matter how many blankets under which you might hide, that truth does not change. We're talking about the God who created and sustains the universe, and unholy things cannot stand in His presence. That might be a difficult thing to understand, but think of it this way: When a light comes on in a dark room, the darkness vanishes. It ceases to be. You and I are born in darkness, and God's holiness and majesty would wipe us out. So who then can save us from God Himself? Who can be our shelter? **Only God can.**

God doesn't make Himself known in His holiness, because He knows that would destroy us. That aspect of God, the God of Whom we should indeed be afraid, remains hidden to us human beings. Luther realized that. The Bible points us to God revealed in Jesus. Jesus is God coming to be with you, coming to save you from our powerlessness in His presence, coming to save you from destruction. God makes Himself known through His grace, giving the gift of forgiveness to you freely

God has set a shelter for you: Jesus' cross. Christians gather around the cross because that's where God offers the freedom that we need. Under the cross, you don't have to fear God's holiness, because Jesus' blood was given in your place. He has bought you for his own, and He is there to swallow up your fear of all that goes bump in the night. You don't have to run any more from the hidden and unknowable God, because the *revealed* God is there, on the cross, for you. Jesus' cross is the mighty fortress, the strong refuge that keeps us against all the frightening forces of this world.

We celebrate the Festival of the Reformation today because we cling to the cross of Christ and him alone as our shelter. We don't have to be afraid of our future, the present, or the past. We can say with the psalmist, "*we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea.*" We hold to the hope that God has made known through His Son, a real Savior against the real terrors that lurk in the dark. **Be afraid? Not under the cross!**

Many in our country celebrate October 31 as Halloween. But for us Lutheran Christians, though, this day is even more: a celebration of God's grace, a reminder of His love for us. In the cross of Christ, we have the ultimate shelter, where He puts an end to all fear.

Happy Reformation Day!

Amen.