

All Things New

October 25, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Revelation 21:1-5; Isaiah 43:18-19

So, who can tell me what is happening one week from (today/yesterday)? *[invite responses]*

Talk about excitement in our house for Halloween.

- My kids are jumping-out-of-their-skin-bonkers-excited about Halloween.
- They have had their Halloween costumes picked out for weeks
- We've bought candy for trick-or-treaters (and then eaten the candy for the trick-or-treaters)
- But for us as Protestant Christians we also celebrate something else on that day: the birthday of Protestantism. The start of the Protestant Reformation. We might call it Reformation Day. (Yay? Just me?)

Yup. I'm a theological nerd and I get excited about weird things. It's not a day that we as United Methodists necessarily remember or acknowledge every year (although, if you have a background in the Lutheran church, you might be more accustomed to celebrating this day). It's not like Christmas, or Easter, or Pentecost, or even All Saints Day or World Communion Sunday; it's not based on a particular story in scripture, but it instead gives nod to a really important day in history for the life of the church, and it also speaks powerfully to where we are as the church in the world today. So, history lesson!

So:

- Way back in the 15th and 16th Centuries throughout pretty much the whole world, the church looked a lot different than it does now.
- There were just two branches of the church – the Church of Rome (essentially the Roman Catholic Church) and the Byzantine, or the Orthodox, church. These two branches of the church had split about 500 years previously, and from that time onward the only church in the Western world was the Catholic Church. And there was usually only one church in a town, so if you got mad at the priest and wanted to try a different church, tough toodles. You were stuck with what you got.
- And not going to church really wasn't much of an option, either. To be outside of church life was to be on the outside of society. There was no separation of church and state at the time, and politics and religion and society in general were intertwined so closely that at times they were indistinguishable.
- Now, during this time, even though the church was massive, it was also a bit of a mess, as it was still healing from a chaotic season in its not-so-distant past in which three different men had all claimed to be the Pope, and all of them had staunch followers and had tried in vain to excommunicate one another. This had

- caused a lot of the people in the pews to lose respect for the Pope and begin to question the Pope's authority.
- At the start of the 16th Century, the Pope was named Leo X, and Pope Leo got this idea in his mind that he wanted to finish building the Basilica of St. Peter that had been started before his time. He didn't have the money to do it, though, so he came up with this ingenious fundraising idea: That he would sell "Get out of Purgatory free cards" – called "Indulgences."
 - And then add to all of this the recent invention of the printing press. So that now, for the first time in history, the average person in society has access to information that they never had before. This was a gamechanger for people, in much the same way that the birth of the Internet was a gamechanger for today's world.
 - So...churches with financial problems...a general distrust in society for the church and its institutions...a distaste for the political climate...access to new technology that allowed access to more information than people had ever dreamed possible...sound a bit familiar? History has a remarkable tendency to repeat itself.

Around this time, there was a young Catholic priest by the name of Martin Luther. Martin Luther was firmly rooted in the church. He loved the church. But he also took issue with some of what he saw taking place in the church, as well as some of the theology that he had been raised to believe. And so one day he decided to write a paper in which, among other things, he took the church to task over the sale of indulgences. He essentially said that if the Pope truly does have the power to free people from Purgatory, then the Pope should exercise that power indiscriminately and not make people's after-death experience contingent upon how much money they were willing and able to fork over to the church. Luther was basically saying, "dude, you are exploiting people for your own gain. That is not the message of the gospel and that is not the purpose of the church."

And so, on All Hallows' Eve in the year 1517, Martin Luther nailed this paper, called the 95 Theses, to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. And then he sat back, waiting to see what happened.

Truth be told, Martin Luther didn't actually expect much to happen. While he was hoping to begin a conversation – maybe even open up the subject for theological debate – and ideally, prompt some subtle changes in the way the church did business, he was certainly not expecting the firestorm that followed.

What ultimately happened was that Luther was excommunicated and put on trial. He was condemned as a heretic. In that day in age, it was very common for heretics to be stoned, or burned at the stake, or otherwise executed, and so he was in grave danger.

But fortunately for Luther, his argument had struck a chord with people. There was already enough unrest in the Catholic Church, and already enough people who

questioned the goings-on in the church hierarchy, and already enough countries and world leaders who were at odds with the Pope that Luther developed a lot of followers. And in time, the Lutheran church was formed – the first Protestant church ever to break off of the Catholic Church and organize itself with a different hierarchical structure and an entirely different theology. That wasn't his intent – at all. He was hoping for reform in the existing church – not to break away and start a new church altogether. But the world was in the kind of place where it was ripe for change. And so all it took was one simple action on the part of one man and the course of the next 500 years would be radically changed.

The Reformation made its way from Germany to Switzerland, where the Anabaptists – the precursors of today's Mennonites – were formed. And then the Calvinists – which later gave way to the Presbyterians. And then, to England, when King Henry VIII had a beef with the Pope and broke off to form the Anglican church, from which we Methodists are descended. And then other Reformers began to crop up all over the West, setting the stage for all of the different Protestant denominations that we have today.

So as fascinating as church history can be, what does all this have to do with our scriptures today? Or the state of the world today, 500 years later?

Everything.

What we saw in the Reformation was a great “shake-up.” The church was a mess. The world was a mess. Corruption was running rampant. People were having a hard time trusting one another, and they were having a *really* hard time trusting their leaders. But at just the right time, at precisely the moment when people were primed and ready to receive it, the voice of God unexpectedly cut through the darkness and confusion and brought forth something new. Something unexpected and unintended. A gift, that would renew and revitalize the church for centuries.

And that is exactly what God promises us that he will do. Over and over again in scripture. We read it in Isaiah when Israel is in exile and their whole world has been turned upside-down. “Stop looking behind you. Stop trying to go back to the darkness from which you came. I am about to do a new thing,” God tells them. “Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

“Take my hand and step with me into the new life that I am creating for you,” God says. Let go of all of that stuff – all of that mess – that was standing between you and me. Let go of the brokenness. Let go of the sin. Let go of the pain of the past. Let go of everything that was not serving you well. And let me show you a new way – something you never even dared to dream of before now.”

And we hear this same voice again, saying very much the same thing in the book of Revelation. After God has spent many chapters talking about destruction and judgment, and the lake of fire and torment and annihilation, chapter 21 invites us to take a deep breath as God breathes a huge “and yet.”

“When all this has come to pass,” God says, “when heaven and earth have passed away,” when it feels like death and pain and darkness have gotten the last word...when you have lost all hope and it feels like there is no good left to hang onto, that will be just the beginning. “See, I am making all things new,” God tells us.

And that is exactly what God does. Over and over and over again, throughout scripture, throughout history, and even up until right now, God has been constantly, and repeatedly, in the process of creating, and recreating, and recreating again. Of bringing light into the darkness; of calling us to cast off the sin that binds us so that we can step into the new life that he has prepared for us.

God does that in our individual lives every day, but if we look throughout history, God has been about this work on a global level, for pretty much forever.

About 10-15 years ago, a woman by the name of Phyllis Tickle wrote a book titled *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. And in this book she makes the argument that roughly every 500 years the church goes through a massive transition, completely redefining itself. She calls these transitions “rummage sales,” essentially times when the church gets to look at who we are and what is no longer serving us well, and toss out the baggage so that we can step into something new.

- It happened in the beginning through the person of Jesus and the birth of Christianity. And when we were given “The Great Commandment” to love God and love neighbor, and “The Great Commission” to make disciples of all people.
- Then about 500 years later we had what Tickle calls “The Great Consolidation” – when the church gets together, and puts its theology down on paper – in the form of the creeds, saying essentially, in one unified voice “THIS” is who we are, and this is what we believe.
- And then, 500 years later was the “Great Schism” when the East and the West split into the Catholic and Orthodox churches, when for the first time, the church was not one unified voice, but two voices with different beliefs and different expressions.
- And then, after another 500 years was the start of the Protestant Reformation.
- We can also go back in time even further – delving into Old Testament history – before the time of Jesus – and see massive events, spaced at roughly 500-year intervals, give or take a few decades. A little more than 500 years BC we had the Babylonian exile, and the ministry of the prophets. Roughly 1000 BC, the reign of King David. 500 years before that, the Exodus. All massive turning points in the relationship between God and God’s people.

And now, here we sit, roughly 500 years after the Reformation. Phyllis Tickle calls the time we are living in now “The Great Emergence” and she believes that we are once again undergoing a massive transition as a church. That God is in the process of redefining who we are. God is once again, both in our individual lives and in the life of the world, in this age when things seem so broken and fragmented and confusing, God is actively bringing about the newness that God promises. And that is hard, and it is scary, and what we will look like when all is said and done, nobody knows. And yet we trust in the beauty and creativity of God.

“Do not remember the things of old,” God tells us. “Stop looking backward toward what used to be. Don’t let nostalgia get in the way of what I am doing right now.”

Hard words during COVID, when all we really want is to get back to the things that “used to be.” But still words of challenge and promise to us. “I am about to do a new thing,” God tells us. “Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?”

“See, I am making all things new. Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”

I am the source of all hope, when hope seems lost. I will make a way where there is no way. I will set your hearts on fire when it feels like the spark is gone.

So keep awake. Don’t lose heart. And receive with joy the newness that has yet to be revealed.