



Reflections by: Rev. Teresa Larson
Text: Isaiah 55:10-11

October 26, 2025

The Reforming Word

The Word goes out, it is heard, it has meaning, it has impact, something happens, something changes, and then the Word returns to be sent out again; that's the rhythm of God's Word, according to the prophet Isaiah, and the rhythm of our words as well. Unlike God's Word, though, our words don't always "succeed in the thing for which" they are sent. Perhaps no one knows this better than the man behind the words that sparked the Protestant Reformation that we celebrate today, Martin Luther: priest, professor, and author of 95 theses nailed to the door of the Wittenburg Church in Germany on October 31, 1517.

Earlier that year the archbishop of Mainz had come through town selling indulgences (essentially, a way for people to buy themselves out of sin). Luther found this to be a terrible blasphemy; he wrote down 95 points about church life he wished to debate sometime soon and posted them like one most post a comment on a blog or social media post. Little did Luther know that his words would soon incite a revolutionary reform. What began as a dispute over indulgences struck a core debate about who God is and what it means to be a Christian. The movement also coincided with the rise of the printing press and the availability of the written word, accelerating this reformation movement across Europe.

For Luther and the Reformers that followed, the Protestant Reformation was centered on the idea that humanity's salvation is secured not by indulgences, papal decrees, penance, or good works, but solely by grace through faith. Salvation and righteousness are not to be earned or be arbitrated through the institutional church. They are already freely given by the grace of God through Jesus Christ. Redemption requires no human cooperation. To use Isaiah's imagery, God's Word that goes out is one of restoration; it calls us out for the ways we have sinned and wandered from God, but assures us that we are forgiven and can start leading our lives in a different way *right now* – and gives us instructions in how to do so.

That word *about* God's Word came down and went out through Luther, whose hammer and nail sparked a fire we are still fanning the flames of over 500 years later. In her book *The Great Emergence: How the Church is Changing and Why*,¹ Phyllis Tickle wrote that the Church has a rummage sale roughly every 500 years in which old traditions, structures, and practices are discarded to make way for the new thing bubbling up. We're a little over 500 years since the Reformation and new things in the Christian expression of faith are bubbling up faith around the world, especially in the global south. We may initially

find what's bubbling up here in our own context a little troubling and disheartening; while church attendance continues a decline (though seems to be leveling out), there is a frightening rise in Christian nationalism, in which faith is being wielded as a weapon to achieve dominance in political, cultural, and social life rather than the toolbox from which we build the kingdom of God.

Yet, as the prophet says, God's Word is going out. It's our job as members of the Church to listen together for the word God is speaking to us today, and the word that we are to proclaim and the work we are called to do. This is difficult work to do, especially in a world where there are so many other words vying for our attention. How *do* we listen for God's word?

There is no perfect answer that I alone can give you. But I'm more than confident that we can figure it out together, inspired by the words that sparked the Reformation we celebrate today.

The Reformation broke open a new way to hear and engage with God's Word: to begin from a place of freedom and confidence in God's love and grace, rather than a place of fear of and individualistic concern for our own salvation.

In an article for *The Mockingbird Ministries*, author Todd Brewer wrote that: "Luther took the existing paradigm of grace and turned it entirely on its head. Rather than something to one day achieve, salvation becomes good news of a belovedness already given, of a kindness shown to enemies, of a generosity shown regardless of whether it will be reciprocated. The life of the Christian is not spent living up to God's call to holiness, but a radical freedom to love as God first loved us."²

Being freed by redeeming love, we are free to hear God's Word to us afresh. We do this by listening first to the voice of the Spirit that is within each of us and by listening to the voices of others (especially those voices who have long been silenced). We can look, too, to our history - the creeds and confessions of faith like the one we heard by the choir earlier - and ask, "how has God spoken to us before? What words has our faith tradition given us that can point us in the right direction?"

Most importantly, we listen for the gift of the Word, God's Word to us, and to the Word-Made-Flesh, Jesus Christ, who commands us to love our neighbor and to proclaim the good news of God's love and grace that is for all people: A word of hope is spoken into the void of hopelessness; a word of comfort is shared with the disheartened; a word of peace is given in the midst of despair and division; a word of justice is proclaimed against the powerful systems that are anything but; a word of empathy is shared in a world so desperately in need of it; a word of confession is said that names where harm has been done; a word of grace that is shared in response; a word of lament for a world that ought not be; a word of joy in spite of it all; a word of

gratitude for God's grace that leads the way. All of it, a confession of faith and a call to worship: God's Word going out and accomplishing what it was sent out to do.

It is God's word of overwhelming grace and love, not fear, that leads in our lives, should we have the courage to listen and trust in its saving promises. The Reformation revealed for us a way to receive God's promises sent to us, sparking creativity and joy, inspiring imaginations capable of dreaming God's dreams, calling all of creation beloved and igniting it into action – action that brings restoration, reformation, transformation, and new life.

God's Word has come to us, in the voices of the prophets, in the Word-Made-Flesh, and in the Holy Spirit that dwells within and around us, speaking to us still and calling us anew. May that reforming Word meet us and speak through us, by God's grace, and for God's glory; for a Church reformed, always reforming. Amen.

¹ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How the Church is Changing and Why*, 2012.

² Todd Brewer, *Why Celebrate Reformation Day?*. 2024. <https://mbird.com/theology/reformation/why-celebrate-reformation-day/>