
*No Empty Word of God**

**An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The Eve of the Feast of Martin Luther**

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Nowadays we are accustomed to associating the name, “Martin Luther,” with our own homeboy, the mid-20th century Atlanta native, Martin Luther King, Jr. Yay, Martin! Thank God for you! But of course our Martin bears that name because of the original Martin Luther—the Protestant reformer who died on February 18th in the year 1546. Indeed, so accustomed are we all to associating the name Martin Luther with Dr. King that the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, provides this notification as the top its article on the 16th century reformer: “Not to be confused with ‘Martin Luther King, Jr.’”

But I say, tongue-in-cheek: why be so correct? Rather, in this particular case some confusion can be beneficial; even inspirational. Consider exploiting the confusion, I mean benefiting from it, by drawing out the correspondences found in the hymns, the scripture readings, and the prayers selected for today’s observance. I won’t belabor the connections myself; I’ll leave that to you as churchgoers and intelligent listeners. Let’s begin with our hymns, for example.

Now church musicians (thank you Dale and Tim, Herb and Chase) can always be counted on to select Luther’s own most famous hymn for us to sing on his feast day. Even the German title is a classic in a list of terms inviting cultural literacy: *Ein Feste Burg*, “A Mighty Fortress.” If *Ein Feste Burg* were the only German you ever learned it would be worthwhile: *Ein Feste Burg*, “A Mighty Fortress.” Not only that, but if you committed to memory the hymn’s English verses (trans. Frederic Hedge, d. 1890) your spirituality would be immeasurably enriched. Let me show you what I mean.

A mighty fortress is our God,
a bulwark never failing;
our helper he amid the flood
of mortal ills prevailing:
for still our ancient foe
doth seek to work us woe;
his craft and power are great,
and, armed with cruel hate,
on earth is not his equal.

Unequaled also are the lines in the hymn’s final verse’ the verse that keynotes our other hymns, prayers, and scripture readings selected for today. That final verse proclaims:

That word [of God] above all earthly powers,
no thanks to them, abideth;
the Spirit and the gifts are ours
through him who with us sideth:
let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;
the body they may kill:
God’s truth abideth still,
[God’s] kingdom is forever.

What preacher could not revel in unpacking each line of that celebrated hymn? And more to the point: what

believer would not be blessed to occupy one's soul with each verse of the hymn? As your speaker today, for example, I can't resist connecting the dots between the hymn's last verse just quoted and our first scripture reading appointed for today. Revel with me in connecting the Isaiah reading to these lines of Luther's verse about God's Word: 'That that word above all earthly powers . . . abideth . . . through Him who with us sideth . . . the body they may kill: God's truth abideth still, God's kingdom is forever.'

Hear the connection now in Isaiah's ancient prophecy (55:9,11).

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts . . .

so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Now, who on earth can really talk like that? Who but God or God's spokesperson can dare to claim such power and majesty as to be able to declare, 'My word shall not return to me empty.' Oh my! If only we had enough faith to believe in and act on those words. How many crises and challenges would we weather with fortress-like faith, if we could only hold fast to the belief that the Word of God will 'not return empty, but will accomplish the thing for which God intended?'

In order to bolster such faith we have our other prayers, scriptures and hymns available today. Consider the faith-bolstering intention of our Collect appointed for Martin Luther's feast day.

The Collect

O God, our refuge and our strength, who raised up your servant Martin Luther to reform and renew your church in the light of your word: Defend and purify the church in our own day and grant that, through faith, we may boldly proclaim the riches of your grace, which you have made known in Jesus Christ our Savior . . .

{Omitted for Evensong Meditation at the Cathedral of St. Philip 2/16/2025-->}

Now those of us who have sat in church pews for decades can hear in that prayer the hallmarks of Protestant theology that in some way or another derive from Luther. These markers have been summarized as the five *solae* (Latin) or the 5 'alones' of Reformation theology (Wikipedia).

- 1) Scripture alone as our infallible authority for tradition - *Sola scriptura*
- 2) Faith alone as our means of justification (vs. works) - *Sola fide*
- 3) Grace alone as our unmerited means of salvation - *Sola gratia*
- 4) Christ alone as our mode of atonement with God - *Solus Christus*
- 5) The glory of God alone as our supreme motivation - *Soli Deo gloria*

Yes, those are the 5 *solae*: each one, by the way, requiring its own careful interpretation—*scripture* alone; *faith* alone; *grace* alone; *Christ* alone; and the *glory of God* alone. Certainly those hallmarks have garnered many disputes over the centuries since the Reformation. And certainly Luther himself remains a contested figure in our gallery of 'lesser feasts and fasts.' For many Roman Catholics he is forever *persona non grata* as a principal source of the historic breakaway from the Roman church. Moreover for Jews, and for liberal theologians such as myself, he is notorious for his defamations that certainly contributed to the 20th century Holocaust under the Nazis.

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Despite undeniable failings such as antisemitism, however, I continue to revere Luther as a "sinner saved by grace." For me one of his virtues stands out in particular: his singular quest announced in the following expression that is attributed to him: "How can I get a gracious God?" That is the quest that reportedly tormented his conscience as a young monk in the monastery. "How can I get a gracious God?" Finding a gracious God became such a desperate and all-consuming need for 'young man Luther' (title of Erik Erikson's 1958 psychoanalytic biography) that until his breakthrough it appears he suffered stomach issues due to self-condemnation for his personal sins and unworthiness.**

But for me the question, "How can I get a gracious God?" involves a larger quest beyond personal salvation,

redemption, or sanctity. It is also the quest raised by today's crises in our world civilizations and by the key challenges facing our global cultures. How can we get a gracious God who presides over time, space, and all creation? How can we get a gracious God who vouchsafes that Dr. King's vision of beloved community will prevail? And finally, how can we get the gracious God whom Jesus announces in today's gospel reading—the God who abides in love and who fosters for all people a love ethic; an ethical revolution that is truly desirable, in the title of Bach's popular chorale; desirable as the 'joy of human desiring?'***

9As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (John 15: 9-11)
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* "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).

** To appreciate the mature Luther, including his wit and urbanity alongside his theology, see "Martin Luther's Table Talk" rendered in a variety of online as well as printed presentations such as the following:
<https://www.beaconlights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Vol-66-No-9-October-2007-Martin-Luthers-Tabletalk.pdf>.

*** "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" is the popular English title of the chorale from the 1723 [Advent](#) cantata [Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben](#) (Heart and Mouth and Deed and Life), BWV 147, by [Johann Sebastian Bach](#) (Wikipedia). Watch <https://youtu.be/S6OgZCCoXWc> (YouTube). Cf. the following English version is "attributed to the [poet laureate Robert Bridges](#). It is not a translation of the stanzas used within Bach's original version, but is inspired by stanzas of the same hymn that Bach had drawn upon: "Jesu, meiner Seelen Wonne." (Wikipedia)

Jesu, joy of man's desiring,
Holy wisdom, love most bright;
Drawn by Thee, our souls aspiring
Soar to uncreated light.
Word of God, our flesh that fashioned,
With the fire of life impassioned,
Striving still to truth unknown,
Soaring, dying round Thy throne.