

**Happy Reformation Day! This Thursday, October 31, 2024, many will celebrate Halloween. Many others will celebrate reformation day. For 507 years ago, Martin Luther posted the 95 thesis on doors at Wittenburg University. This one symbolic act propels a story about a dramatic change in the face of religious.**

**Stories about Martin Luther and the birth of Protestantism are commonplace. Many have heard parts of the story and have a general idea of how the Protestant Reformation split from Catholicism. Greta Anderson tells the story in a middle school religious education curriculum which tells the story following predictable lines. It goes like this:**

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in what is now Germany. He was christened in the Roman Catholic Church, like everyone else in the Holy Roman Empire, which stretched through most of Europe at the time. He received his doctorate in theology from Wittenberg University in 1512. Five years later, in 1517, he nailed a list of 95 "theses", or arguments, to the door of the Wittenberg Church. Many of these arguments dealt with indulgences. At that time, it was not enough to confess one's sins. The Catholic Church encouraged people to secure their salvation by purchasing certificates called indulgences. This would clear a person of sin—for a while, until more sins accumulated, and another indulgence needed to be purchased.

The church used the money from indulgences for various purposes, cathedral, which served as his seat of power. A large, ornate cathedral helped glorify not only God but the bishop who presided there.

But that is not Martin's main concern in this letter. He is worried about the souls of the parishioners. How does one absolve oneself of sins? Clearly not through money. What about good deeds? Luther said no.

Human actions had no real power in matters of eternity. He was developing a brand-new theology. In it, what mattered was how the person felt about his or her sins—whether or not she/he had inwardly surrendered to the total power and grace that is God.

Luther did not just wake up one day believing in something new. Hours and hours of study convinced him of the importance of faith rather than acts. Legends tell of Luther reading the Bible through the night by the light of a sputtering candle. To understand it better, he read the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek.

Unfortunately, not everyone was so ready to go against the established power of the Church—least of all the Church itself.

The Pope excommunicated him. If he could not reform Catholicism, he must start his own church. Thus began the Protestant Revolution in Europe.

This is good to know. No matter your belief or theology, it is an important part of our history.

However ...

This is just one layer of a complicated and culturally altering story.

And to begin the journey of exploring the many layers of this altering story, one must first understand that the real change did not begin in religion. It began in science and society. I am grateful to two authors, Phyllis Tickle who wrote the Great Emergence and Karen Armstrong who wrote The Battle for God: The History of Fundamentalism who are credited for my learning in today's message.

Let us imagine that we are in Germany at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. We are still recovering from the effects of the Black Death which was at its height in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and according to Karen Armstrong, decreased the Christian population of Europe by 33%. However, according to an Oxford University study who admits that population records are not always reliable, the population decreased by 46%.

The 100 years war between England and France from 1347 to 1453 also left its mark on history as we entered the sixteenth century. The devastation of these (and other events) in the middle ages were felt. However, there was also hope. Science and technology were in rapid advancement:

Michael read quotes from two scientists of this time credited with great discoveries – Copernicus and Galileo.

There were new discoveries about our planet and the stars

Explorers discovered new lands across the sea and these discoveries opened the door to the development of new communities and new nations.

New inventions made mapping more precise. Travel became more predictable and reliable.

Inventions of microscopes created an increase interest in better medicine, health and sanitation. It also opened up a world of understanding the world we cannot see with the human eye.

Telescopes brought the stars to us and we began to see ourselves and our place in the universe in new ways.

Inventions also made the tracking of time more precise. This would change the way we engaged in society in profound ways.

And this one fascinates me: scientists began to form the first earth science which saw the patterns of weather as a part of a great, connectional web – not just acts of the divine.

The invention of the printing press made reading more accessible and as you will see in a few minutes, the shifts in religion created a world where literacy increased drastically.

Out of this, more predictability in every day life led to a growth in capitalism and wealth.

It can be expected that religious ideas and belief would shift. And as we commonly understand the protestant reformation, we see it as a movement to progress from the corruption of indulgences and those in power in the roman catholic church. But as we read into it, this may not have been the case.

Martin Luther, one of the leaders of the protestant reformation was actually trying to take religion back to its pure roots when it was not corrupt – when it was not as powerful as today. Instead of MAGA. We had MORGA (Make our Religion Great Again).

Luther was reacting to the new and clinging to old ways but hoping that he could use modern tools. For example, Protestantism grew in its message of individual discernment thanks to the printing press and the concurrent rise of literacy.

Luther and some of his peers (Calvin and Zwingli) attacked the theologians of the medieval period. Luther actually suffered from depression and in his early life, was deeply terrified of death.

Their hope was that the Roman Catholic church would wake up to its corrupt ways and want to reform. They did not. And when Luther was excommunicated, he took his message and formed a new church – a new movement.

And Martin Luther was angry. According to Karen Armstrong, he was angry with the Pope, the Turks, the Jews, Women and rebellious peasants. He was also angry with anyone who disagreed with him. This set a division that is still felt within our religions and society.

Here is one of the most important outcomes of this new movement. His goal of creating a more pure religious community separated religion from politics, culture and society.

Yes, for the first time. Religion and government. Religion and culture were separate. The Protestant reformation is responsible for the birth of secularism. And in this secularism – not in religious communities – we see a rise of an understanding of universal human rights. We also see a rise in the demand for democracy.

Most of what I have just spoke came from Karen Armstrong in the Battle for God. I highly recommend all of her books. Now, I would like to shift to Phyllis Tickle's research and theory. This may be familiar. I have spoken of it before.

Tickle believes that every 500 years, there is a monumental shift in religion. This transition upsets all that we currently believe in how we gather and why. It is also tied to a major shift in invention, technology and culture. In the sixteenth century, it was tied to the many inventions including but not limited to the printing press. Take note, we are 507 years after the Protestant reformation. We are in the middle of the next great transition.

Phyllis Tickle sees this as a great religious transformation that is a religious transition. I believe that is a part of it. Broader and more importantly, I believe we ride the wave of societal transformations that may look religious but are broader in definition. In the protestant reformation, the cultural transition around politics, the birth of democracy, and a better lifestyle and technology led to the reformation which wanted to move back to a purer way of being areligious people.

Does this sound familiar?

I ask you – what of this is true today? What parallels are the same?

I have no direct answers - that's too easy.

But I pose the question for discussion and reflection.

And I end with this quote from Karen Armstrong. This quote is relevant to the transformations felt during the Protestant Reformation. It may also be true today:

Like the conservative Muslim reformers therefore, the protestant reformers are revolutionary and reactionary. They did not yet belong to the new world that was coming but were rooted in the old They were also men of their time and this was a time of transition. The modernizing process can induce great anxiety as their world changes, people feel disoriented and lost....experience the slow transformation in incoherent ways. As the old mythology that gave structure and significance to their lives crumbles under the impact of change. They can experience a numbing loss of identity. And a paralyzing despair. The most common emotions are helplessness and a fear of annihilation that can in extreme circumstances erupt in violence....

The hope for this message is to help us take the broad view. It may appear political but is helping us understand current affairs in historical context. As we hold space for a challenging and divisive election, I hope we can be in the moment and lean into one another for strength and support. We may not all agree but we can still continue to love.

Blessed Be.

Michele Grove

Links to resources for this sermon:

The Service leader, Michael Staver read quotes. You can find these quotes here: [https://www.azquotes.com/author/3262-Nicolaus\\_Copernicus](https://www.azquotes.com/author/3262-Nicolaus_Copernicus) and [https://www.azquotes.com/author/5284-Galileo\\_Galilei](https://www.azquotes.com/author/5284-Galileo_Galilei)

Martin Luther Reading by Greta Anderson:

<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/youth/bridges/workshop12/martin-luther>

Research on the Black Death: <https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/black-death-and-european-expansion>

**Armstrong, Karen. The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.** HarperCollins, 2001.

Phyllis Tickle: The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why. Ada, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2012.