

John 8:31–36

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

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Even though Reformation Day commemorates an event now five hundred years in the past, the texts set out an ebullient future full of promise, and even now that promise is breaking in on us.

In recent years Reformation Day has become something of an embarrassment, or has been treated that way by church officials. No doubt there were some awful excesses in the past. I remember, as a child and even as a young pastor, the kind of exemption from the Eighth Commandment preachers used to get on Reformation Day. We'd all stand up and talk about those nasty Catholics and then tell about the Reformation as the corrective. And of course the funny part was that the corrective recommended by an awful lot of pastors had more in common with late medieval Catholicism than it did with Lutheranism. I heard that more than once, and while I wanted to cry, I had to laugh just the same.

So finally we're getting Reformation Day back, and we're getting it back in a wonderful way. It disappeared for a while. In the green book that comes from Augsburg, you even had to go looking for the Reformation Day texts, because the church officials wanted to pass it by. Now we've got it, and we've got texts you could preach on from Sunday to Friday if you wanted to. They are just full and overflowing with goodness. They break out in something of a quartet, with Jesus singing the lead in John 8, one of the magnificent texts in that gospel.

We start with the book of Revelation. I always remember the description Ernst Käsemann gave of the author of Revelation, John the Revelator, or whoever we want to say he was: trying to break through the prison walls, urgent with the Word as he was in exile on Patmos. And he is singing his heart out today in that text from Revelation 14. He is singing so hard and so loud, in fact, that he has pushed the Old Testament right out of Reformation Day. How do you like that? In lots of ways, the restoration of the Old Testament to the life of the church counts as one of the great accomplishments of the Reformation. But here Revelation has trumped Isaiah, or Jeremiah. Can you imagine? I can't quite figure it out, but we'll take him, because he has a great word for us.

Then we hit Psalm 46. I think of Psalm 46 as one of those Russian basses who can sing right off the bottom of the piano. When I was a student at Concordia in Moorhead years ago, I had a friend there named Hal Geldahl who had one of those voices, vocal cords as thick as elastic bands, booming right down to the bottom. Well, here comes Psalm 46 with a beautiful song: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” We’ll be lucky if we even get past that verse, because there is so much here that you just can’t run out of it.

And with that the apostle Paul comes in, singing a mellow tenor, I expect. We’ve got Romans 3 here, the justification of the ungodly writ large, so he’ll sing his tune. And then when we get to John 8, we’ve got Jesus himself. When he cranks up, it’s promises and promises and promises. If he were a politician, your suspicions would be raised, and should be. But of course the difference is that Jesus delivers in the very word he speaks. This is no Romnesia, and it’s going to be no Obamacare. This is the straight stuff, full of promise, given over, and given over with enough to carry us for a long time.

Revelation 14: An Eternal Gospel

So here we go, first of all with the supporting texts. I’m real sorry to tick these off so fast, because it’s like having coffee with an old friend: you just want to linger and visit, even with the book of Revelation sticking its finger under your nose. It’s full of urgency and pushing. It’s a lot of fun.

“Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.” You realize how antithetical this is. If you’ve got a good thing, you keep it a secret. If you’re one of those computer companies, you even patent the shape of the screen, just to make sure everything is protected against any illicit use. But here the resurrection of the dead has broken loose, and instead of keeping it secret, the church can hardly wait to spill the news to everybody. So listen to John the Revelator. He is singing his heart out to those who dwell on earth, to every nation, not just Republicans and not just Democrats and not just the Tea Party folks, but to every nation, every tribe, every language (languages multiply), and every people.

And listen to the message the angel sings: “And he said with a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give him glory.’” That’s a different response to the gospel from what we normally think of. We correlate the law with fear and speak of being afraid. But here there is another kind of fear, the fear that goes into the word “awesome.” Overpowering. This is seeing something better than

good, better than best, better than anything you ever saw in your life, and it inspires fear. We say, “Holy smokes, look at that.” It’s the fear of joy, of ebullience, of blessing, of giftedness. Fear God and give him glory, because, boy, he can throw a curveball like nobody else. That thing just drops right off the table. Fear God and give him glory, because he is delivering the whole creation, making all things new.

“Give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come.” Remember always that justification is judgment. The promise is judgment. You can’t detach the one from the other. This is the foolish way to distinguish law and gospel: to pick out the imperatives and throw them away, and pick out the promises and work on those. In fact there is judgment in the promise, and there is judgment in the deliverance, and this is the judgment: he is saving you from yourself. He is taking the future of the earth out of our hands. He is delivering it from us, sick and tired of being sick and tired. Finally he is coming to take us worn-out sinners and do a brand-new thing. “Worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.” Oh, just give me a chance. Good as it gets.

Psalm 46: A Very Present Help in Trouble

From there we go back to Psalm 46. This is the psalm of all psalms, in my mind. You know that it’s the basis of “A Mighty Fortress.” You can work on this psalm for a good long time and never run out of it, because it is so full of goodness.

It starts right away with two images: “God is our refuge and strength.” These are competing images. One is an image of withdrawal and retreat; the other is an image of aggression and conflict. One is your mother, whose arms are open as you come running in from the troubles of the day. The other is your father, leading you out the door and saying, “We’ll find that jerk.” Only God doesn’t talk like that, of course. So: God is our refuge and strength, “a very present help in trouble.”

Now just look at those words. That is so much fun. It’s not enough to say “present.” He is a very present help. And where is he a very present help? Exactly where most of us cut and run. He is a very present help in the trouble. That, of course, is the real miracle of this passage. If he were an idol, it would say he is a very present help from the trouble. If he were one of those two-bit gods advertising on television, spending their substance trying to persuade us of their elegance, he would tell us he was going to solve all our problems. But the good Lord never talks like that. The good Lord is the very present help in the trouble, smack-dab in the middle

of it. I'll bet you a significant amount, you name it, that if you start talking to the people in your parishes about when the gospel has really come home to them, they will tell you about a time when they were in trouble and God came and delivered them.

This is as far as we're going to get with this psalm, of course, which sounds ridiculous. I'd like to go back to Africa and preach for four hours on it, but Julie will turn me off after forty-five minutes. Anyway, from here the psalm draws the conclusion: "Therefore we will not fear." Golly, can you imagine? Fear is a legitimate response to all the stupidities that surround us. Fear is in fact required. If you thought about the risks you take every day, paralysis would be the legitimate conclusion. But because God is a very present help in the trouble, we say, "Therefore we will not fear."

He is refuge, providing safety, nurture, care. I hate those sentimental hymns, nestling birds and all the rest of that stuff. But here we've got genuine nurture. He is carrying us; he is caring for us. And when we have this genuine nurture, then we have strength, so that we don't just sit there feeling sorry for ourselves, looking at his feathers, but can fly away into the trouble with confidence and strength. Pretty wonderful.

Romans 3: Justified by His Grace as a Gift

And if we haven't got enough on our plates already this week, we get Romans 3:19–28. I've been sitting on this text and John 8 since yesterday, and they've been sitting on me. Actually John 8 woke me up in the middle of the night, for Pete's sake. These texts are so magnificent; they just fill you with joy.

In the first couple of verses, the apostle Paul draws the conclusion of the gospel concerning the law. This is very important, because the argument works backward. Generally Lutherans say, of course, that the law kills and the gospel gives life. But here the order is reversed: the gospel has come first, and it has exposed the law. This is very much like the argument in Galatians: "If justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose." The argument is a reflex of the gospel. This is the conclusion Paul draws concerning the law in the light of the gospel.

"Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God." There we go. This is what the law does. We can see it in the light of the gospel: the law is not going to save. Since Jesus saves, Moses can't. Plain as day. "For by works of the law no human being

will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” Here we go. The law is futile for salvation. It won’t work. It can’t save anybody. It struts around pompously, declaring itself the savior of the world, but it can’t deliver. It’s like those politicians: full of promise, but no delivery.

So now that Paul has exposed the law in the light of the gospel, he has to point to the alternative, and of course the alternative is already on deck. He is the one who has pushed the law out of the driver’s seat. “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested.” And how has it been manifested? “Apart from the law.” Thanks a lot; no help there. “Although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it”: they couldn’t help it. “The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” There we go. Faith has taken its place.

Now I want you briefly to consider a metaphor. I know the problem with metaphors, but I’ve been playing with this one for a while. When you hear a young pianist, a young musician, playing, you hear somebody so concerned about getting the notes right that he can’t hear the music. That’s the law. The law is those notes on the page telling you what you ought to sound like. But we all know the difference between knowing the notes and knowing the music. There are some people who never learn the music, even though they know all the notes. The music has a life of its own.

So here’s the difference. The law, which commands attention to all those notes, will never make a musician out of you. Faith makes a musician out of you. In faith we start singing in tune with Christ Jesus. Then we’re not watching ourselves play every note, listening to ourselves play every note. Rather, we’re playing along, and then you hear the music start to come. That’s how faith happens. This is the righteousness of God. Righteousness is a relational term. It describes being in the appropriate relation, being grounded in relation, being in tune with God, playing along with him. This happens by faith.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift.” What does he do? He puts the old Adam, who always sings flat or sharp, to death, and raises up a new being in us who can sing in tune, who looks to Christ Jesus instead of watching the notes all the time, who looks at the conductor instead of always wondering whether he or she is singing properly, and who sings along just for the joy of it.

And now he turns to describe how this happens: “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” That is, Christ Jesus is the one who has finally brought us into tune and made faith

possible, “whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.” That is, because of Christ Jesus, who has now become our sin, who is now the sinner, we are redeemed, and we have life in his name.

Well then, what does this mean for us? “What becomes of our boasting?” Well, I’ve got a lot to brag about, thanks a lot. I am not the latest moral reclamation project on the block. I’m one of the sinners, with all the rest. “It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.” Christ is good, as good as his word. “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” That is, we are tuned up not by our music reading, not by our close attention to the law, but by his creation of a new heart within us.

I just hate to speed over this. You want to linger over every word. But we’ve got Jesus tapping us on the shoulder and saying, “Hey, it’s my turn,” so we’d better hurry on to John 8. Boy, I’ll tell you, if there was ever a lick and a promise on Romans 3, I just gave it. Devastating. But we’ve got to get to John 8, because of course Jesus likes to carry the freight himself, and he doesn’t like anybody else horning in. So we’d better let him have his time. He’ll take it if we don’t give it to him.

John 8: The Truth Will Make You Free

“So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’” Virtually every word here is loaded, starting with “abide”: continuing, resting, being defined by, being captured by his word. “If you abide in my word.” How does this happen? Of course it happens as we abide in the text, as we abide in Scripture. It happens in church, in the reading of the text, in the singing of the hymns, and in the sacrament.

Abiding in his word is having an ear continuously tuned for his voice, just as a lover is tuned to the beloved’s voice. We have an ear cocked. I remember when our first son was born, how both of us slept with our ears turned to the crib, and at the slightest stir we were up to check on him. Later on we could sleep through thunderstorms without even hearing him, but for the first little while, that’s a little of what this is. Abiding in his word is always listening for him, wondering what he has in mind now. What’s he going to do? What’s he up to now? We know that his word is going to come out as promised.

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples.” Discipleship is defined here not as an act or achievement of ours. It follows out of the word. You become a disciple through this hearing. This is how faith happens, and faith makes us his disciples.

“And you will know the truth.” You know this is *ginosko*, and this knowing is the knowing of the deepest intimacy we experience in human life. Adam knew Eve, and Eve knew Adam. And now we know Christ Jesus, not in the sexual sense, but in a sense very parallel to it, in that we are defined by him. We are shaped to him. He has become our last, like the cobbler’s last, so that we are being made to fit him. “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know”: you will be brought into the deepest intimacy the word provides. “You will know the truth.”

You always have to remember here that when Jesus speaks of the truth, he is not speaking philosophically or propositionally, as we automatically assume. He is speaking relationally. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” The truth is not a statement that can be abstracted from Jesus and memorized. The truth is on two feet: breathing, touching, healing, releasing, forgiving. There’s the truth. To know the truth is to know Jesus and to know him in the depths: to know what to expect of him and count on him, to look to him, to know what he is good for, and to expect him to make promises and keep them.

“And the truth will set you free.” Obviously this is not the freedom of the eighteen-year-old just out of high school: no restraints, no limits. This kind of freedom is the freedom granted in the deepest relationships of life. Adam and Eve were naked and were not ashamed. They weren’t seeking to cover themselves or worrying about the judgment being rendered. They were free for one another. It is in that sense that we are free. We have been placed under Christ’s care, at the center of things, for the earth. We are firstfruits, and we are free. We can live and move, and that freedom is the hallmark of the gospel. You remember Luther’s definition: free from the powers of sin, death, and the devil, and free for the neighbor and the earth. There it is, the deepest freedom of life.

Everyone Who Commits Sin Is a Slave

Now this great promise does what Jesus’ great promises do: it exposes the unbelief of his listeners. These hearers of Jesus speak on behalf of all who have heard this promise and all who will hear it, and their protest is urgent: “We have never been enslaved to anyone.” This, of course, is the eternal human illusion: that freedom can be grasped, and having been grasped,

can be held, and can be held by excluding all who threaten it, all who would be an impediment to it. “We will finally get loose. We have finally gotten loose, and we can be ourselves and do as we please.” And so we see another consequence of the gospel. These people, protesting that they are free already and have no need of a redeemer, are in fact exposing themselves as bound in other chains they do not see.

So this is the consequence Jesus draws: the promise becomes the basis of an indictment.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”

I remember when my grandmother, one of the dearly beloved people of my life, was dying, she asked me to come back to her home parish when she was gone and do Bible Week, which was of course the big event of the year. They had abused one another for years and burned one another out trying to come to faith. They had a young pastor, a recent graduate of Luther, who was teaching them that they were in bondage to sin, and of course those old Pietists didn’t believe that for a minute. One of them stood up and said to me, “Prove this from the Bible!” And I said, “I think you just proved it.” Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. There you go. That’s about as ruthless an indictment as there can possibly be, because the very intent to prove that I’m not bound sets the chains all the tighter.

“Everyone who commits sin.” Of course there are some sins of which we are aware: puppy sins, the little ones, as Luther calls them, the ones that happen around the refrigerator, or at the TV set, in small things. But most of the really defining sins we’re not even conscious of. We wake up to them long after the fact, and then we say, “Why didn’t I know? I didn’t want this to happen.” I remember when Lee Griffin and I were chasing down all those adulterous pastors years ago. Time and again, they would all say the same thing: “I didn’t plan on this. I wasn’t looking for this. It was the last thing I had in mind. One thing just led to another.” And of course that’s our bondage. One thing just leads to another, one damn thing just leads to another, and soon enough (you know it in your family, you know it at school, you know what a church council means, you know it in politics, you know it in every connection of life) one blame thing turns into another, and pretty soon the trap is set and we see ourselves wretched, captive, bound, and dead.

As Luther used to say, we are carried along by forces bigger than we are. That is not freedom. You remember that whole statement from *The Bondage of the Will*. This is the human situation: Luther says that we imagine ourselves whole, free, and alive, even as we are carried

along wretched, captive, bound, and dead, under the illusion of Satan, our lord. It's just bondage.

If the Son Sets You Free

But now listen to this. Here's the difference. If I had been Jesus, I would have stopped there and said, "You miserable jerks. You get what you deserve. Your bondage is going to carry you right into hell itself." And so I would have condemned them out of my own mouth. But in Jesus' case, the indictment simply becomes the occasion for restating his promise. "The slave does not remain in the house forever."

Even in the old days, when there were these relationships in households, where one was the superior and one the subordinate, and they went on for years and years, the slave had no claim on the house. The slave always remains a slave, and eventually gets thrown out of the house, turned out, usually with a little ceremony to assuage the conscience of the one doing the turning out. These gold watches and all the rest of it are not done for the person leaving. They are done for the person giving them, so he can talk about how nice he was. Exactly. "The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever."

And here we have Sheldon Tostengard's old distinction between the hired man and the son, the apostle Paul's distinction between the hired man and the son. Eventually, no matter how close he is, the hired man goes home someplace else. But the son: it's his place. He has a stake in it.

"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." This is no pretext for achievement. This is not something I have obtained or realized. It is no reward or consequence. If the Son makes me free, then I am free, because he frees me by exposing the old sinner in me. He frees us by bringing us to faith. He frees us by continuing us in his word, so that, abiding in his word, a new future opens, a future full of blessing and hope. This is not the same old same old, sick and tired of being sick and tired, giving up, as one of my old friends in AA used to say, only to drink the same stuff that has been killing me. This is being raised to newness of life in the power of the Word.

And so we can go back to the psalm. By Jesus' promise, solely on the basis of his promise: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." That's the fullness of the Reformation, right in one verse. Of course it's there in Psalm 46. We can hear it in

Revelation 14. Jesus is working it like a beaver in John 8. But there it comes, in the mouth of the psalmist. Is that enough? Have you got something to go on now?

Questions and Answers

A comment from a pastor who sat through the night with a dying man who could speak only with his eyes: at peace while he heard the gospel, afraid when it stopped, until at five in the morning he was free.

Now that's what I call continuing in his word. When the Word is absent, when it is outside our ears, we itch and long and hope and pray for its hearing. And when the gospel comes, there is release, a blessing. That hearing, the hearing of faith, is just full of power.

A comment: freedom from anxiety, from having to please or placate or satisfy anyone.

Yes, for sure. Of course the worst oppressor is ourselves: our desperate attempt to have ourselves and to define things on our own terms. That's where all our anxieties come from, and that is exactly what gets crucified here. That's why the psalmist can say, "Therefore we will not fear," and why Paul says, "What becomes of our boasting? It is excluded." You don't need that stuff anymore; it has been exposed as worthless, the self's relentless attempt to have itself. And then, all of a sudden, we're done. It's a lot of fun. What is there to fear? Not a whole lot, when the good Lord has spoken that promise and is a very present help.

An observation that the gospel that saved Saul, set out in Romans 3, also set Luther free and does the same for us.

You bet it does. Here's what happens. When the church is in the dog days it's in now, Romans disappears and Reformation Sunday becomes an alternative you can take or leave. But when there's trouble, big trouble, then the apostle Paul gets loose, and Isaiah gets loose, and Jesus gets loose in John's Gospel, and then we start to have some fun again.

The good Lord is so jealous, so insanely jealous about this stuff, that he won't let us have anybody else to lean on, and he keeps insisting that his word is sufficient for us. And with texts like these, we have to say: it is, you bet.

We're confident and hopeful. The good Lord likes to raise the dead, you know, so every once in a while we have to push him right to that point, and then he shows up and does it again.

Pretty good. Talk to you later.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WU6AH8aanxA>

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