Rain pours from the sky, pounding the face of a young law student who has been knock down in the mud and puddles looking up to the sky. He was just thrown from his startled horse because a bolt of lighting struck a nearby tree as he was heading back to school. The lighting, thunder, wind and rain is too terrifying. He cries out that he will join the monastery if saved.

The nailing of 95 theses or talking points is quietly, perhaps innocently, posted on the community bulletin board, the church door. It is a request for debate about these issues. A lonely young monk stands before the most powerful men of both church and state facing excommunication and execution says, “Here I stand I cannot do otherwise.” A kidnaping and whisking away to Wartburg to live disguised in a tower for a time.

These are just a few of the many stories we like to recall and recount from the Reformation. The time when a lone, seemingly insignificant German monk professor brought about much needed, and today, celebrated changes within Christ’s bride, the Church. We gather this morning to worship our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and to thank Him that He allowed the preaching and teaching of the most blessed Gospel to continue in His Church. The message that we are only saved and made righteous before God the Father by faith in Christ for Christ’s sake is the center and core of our belief.

The Church had become deformed. The church lapsed in its duty to declare the sole salvific hope for humanity is faith in Christ. Romans 3:28 was forgotten, or worse, ignored in favor of the old human idea that we can work harder, be better, pull our selves up by the spiritual boot straps and earn or buy our salvation through our efforts. The papists taught you can work yourself out of God’s judgement and punishment.

Luther knew the pains, the torture and the fear of a holy God’s perfect judgement. The church in Luther’s day did a wonderful job of teaching people to fear our Holy, Perfect God. Luther tried to expunge himself of this guilt that plagued his thoughts. As a monk, he spent hours in the confessional booth confessing every little sin that crept up in his mind out of fear that he might die with out receiving absolution for his sinfulness. He’d torture and mutilate his flesh by prolonged bouts of fasting or spending the nights sleeping uncovered on the monastery’s cold stone floors, actually flogging himself till his back was bloody and he’d pass out. He did this in some vain humanly attempt to reign the flesh into submission and control so it wouldn’t sin to avoid God’s judgement.

Can it be said this fear of God’s judgement is still grapples the minds of people today? A society that has left the moorings of the Judeo-Christian teachings. In a culture that teaches “just do it” and has twisted tolerance to mean you must accept, celebrate, and approve of however they want to live. Where “thou shalt not steal” is replaced with “thou shalt not commit cultural appropriation,” ‘thou shalt not commit adultery’ is ‘thou may mutually consent to whatever feels good,’ do not murder to ‘my body my choice.’ Sin is the only forbidden word today, and intolerance is only allowed if it is against the Christian world view. In this world that willfully disregards God, are people today really so different than Luther seeking to justify himself?

Holy Scripture says, “No.” The word ‘Justification’ may not be on everyone’s lips, but still the concern of being ‘right, or good’ is in people’s hearts. Paul say, “A man is justified by faith in what God has done for us, apart from the works of law.” The religions of the world labor with half the truth. They trust in ‘works’ and ignore faith. Almost everyone seem to know the human life needs to be put right. The Buddhist tries through ending desires with an ascetic life, the Muslim by submission to Shariah, the Jew by obeying Torah, the Mormon by a legalistic and pietistic lifestyle, the fundamentalists by doing this and avoiding that, and charismatics by having and exercising this gift, and so on and so on. Even atheists labor to be ‘moral, or good.’ All know the human life needs to be put right. None seem to know how this can happen apart from works of their own laws, from their own new and improved works. God wrote His Law on our hearts and by nature we crave the hidden techniques for self-enhancing, self-justification, ever striving to be ‘moral and good’. But all the beauty of our ‘good deeds’ fail in comparison to a perfectly holy God. They wither away like the flowers at the end of the season.

Lutheran theologian Herman Sasse writes: “[God’s] Word discloses man as a sinner. It tears every task from his face, even the mask of piety. It shows us that in our religion, in our moral striving, we seek not God but ourselves. It shows us that there is no righteousness which can be attained by man’s own efforts: ‘There is none righteous, no, not one.”

Paul also wrote, ”For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.” This is the good Word of the Lord. the free gift of the Gospel, that of being freely justified by grace is totally foreign to us. There is no other way humans can be reconciled to a perfect, holy, righteous God. It is the way.

This is what ignited the Reformation. You see, Luther found this free grace of God in his study of the Romans epistle. When he read the words “Man is justified by faith alone,” it was as if the scales fell from his eyes, the weight and torment of guilt for his sins was lifted from his back. God went from a terrifying judge ready to cast sinners off to eternal damnation, into a loving father who would do absolutely anything for His beloved children, even death on the cross. God forgives you because of Christ, not floggings, fasting, pietistic living, or gifts of the spirit. Grace and forgiveness is a gift given in faith alone.

This young Wittenberg professor spotted pastoral malpractice in the Roman church and he sought to argue the case on behalf of Christian people living under the burden of demands which they could not fulfill by their own spiritual power. It was his time in the confessional box that “led him to draw up his theses on indulgences.” The Roman Church taught that indulgences could substitute for fruits of repentance and faith in Christ alone. One could ‘buy forgiveness.’ Luther discovered that absolution did not only signify that the conditions for forgiveness had been met. Rather, absolution was the very word of promise from the Living Christ that delivered the forgiveness of sins to the hearts of the broken. Luther did not set out to change the church or much less establish a new one. Instead, he sought to reform that which had become twisted and deformed. Luther was not about creating a new church, but restoring the Gospel to the Church so that genuine repentance and faith might be preached and lived out in people’s lives. That every nation, tribe and tongue might be brought to worship the loving God as He wills to be worshipped, in His Son, Christ Jesus.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus assures you of forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life. All of these are God’s free gifts to those who have faith in Christ.

The Reformation is an episode in the history of the one, holy Christian, and apostolic Church. This is why we adorn the chancel with red paraments and the pastors wear red stoles on Reformation Sunday. Red is the color of Pentecost, the festival of the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, and enlightens a holy Christian people for Christ Jesus through His Gospel. It is here we receive His forgiveness of sin. We call it Reformation because the church had become deformed by false and misleading teachings which were embodied in errant practices making Christ’s holy bride almost unrecognizable under the papacy.

Sasse says a note found in Luther’s pocket after his death defined the entirety of the Reformer’s work. It read, “We are beggars; that is true.” Where humans cease to be beggars before God, there can only be unrelenting despair and torment or pompous self-righteousness. The life Luther and so many in our world live by outside the Gospel. Our righteousness is forever and always the righteousness that comes by faith alone. It is here that we gather to receive forgiveness, His body and blood and be refilled to live this life of faith for another week, sharing this good news in our daily lives, making disciples of all we encounter. It is in faith that the Christian remain a beggar before a gracious, forgiving Lord. It is the way.