

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Looking Over”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 30—October 29, 2017

Lessons: Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Matthew 22:34-46

Today is a day of looking backwards and looking forwards. Five Hundred Years ago this week, a thirty-three-year-old priest and professor named Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses or opinions about the church and especially those things that he believed needed correction within the church on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. In particular, Luther was concerned about the relationship between money and religion and the sale of indulgences as a way to proclaim forgiveness. Luther would come to proclaim that baptism is the only indulgence necessary for salvation.

Luther is remembered for starting what we know as the Protestant Reformation. According to Dr. Dan Clendenin, “The Protestant Reformation was many different and complex things; it radically altered every sector of European society — church, culture, politics, economics, universities, governments, education, and the everyday lives of ordinary people....[It wasn’t all good news.]

“Christians tortured, burned, beheaded, and quartered each other over the nature of baptism and the Lord's Supper....

“Eventually, toleration and generally peaceful co-existence did result. Hereditary and state powers as divinely sanctioned rights succumbed to the rule of law and the voices of citizens. Individual conscience displaced institutional coercion.

“The Reformation spawned a historical way of thinking from which we continue to benefit today....[especially I would suggest here in this country. Without the Protestant reformation we likely would not have our form of government.]

“[The Reformation] protested clerical corruption and church hypocrisy that had festered for a millennium. People had had enough of religious authoritarianism, exploitation and abuse. Purification of the church and restoration to its original integrity, however idealistic, became the order of the day.

“The Reformation also birthed what Alister McGrath calls a revolutionary and dangerous idea — that ordinary Christians, as opposed to any centralized religious authority, could and should read the Bible for themselves in their own language, and draw their own conclusions from it. That Bible, by the way, is now available in 2,370 different vernacular languages. As a consequence, says McGrath, "uncontrollable" forces were unleashed 500 years ago by Luther and his kin.”¹

So we look back. Our lesson today speaks of an even older time, when Moses went up the mountain and God showed him the whole land. You know what it is like to stand on a mountain top with a view that looks out forever. And God said to Moses, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying I will give it to your descendants; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over there.”

When I read that passage, I am always reminded of another preacher, one who carried the same name as the hero of the Reformation, and the last sermon he ever preached. The night before he was murdered, Martin Luther King, Jr. preached in Memphis, Tennessee. He said if he had been given the opportunity to live at any time in history, he would have chosen his own time, which seemed strange because the world was all messed up, but Dr. King pointed out that “only when it is dark

¹ Dan Clendenin, Two Cheers for the Reformation, in Journey With Jesus, A Weekly Webzine for the Global Church. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/the-eighth-day/current-column?id=1164>

enough can you see the stars.” People he suggested all over the world were rising up and their cry was always the same: “We want to be free.”

Dr. King talked about human rights, and injustice; he talked about non-violent protest and the power of economic boycott. His words still offer a challenge for us today. And then he claimed a part of our passage today: “Well, I don’t know what will happen now; we’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And so I’m happy tonight; I’m not worried about anything; I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”²

As we look back today, I want to suggest that everyone of us has been given a view from the mountaintop of the Promised Land, of the world as God would have it be, of the world as it will one day be. Today we get to look over that land and dream of what we can do to bring us closer to that day when all God’s people will live together, a day when we will all live the commandments Jesus teaches, loving God with all our heart and soul and mind and loving our neighbors, not just here in Westover Hills, but in all of Wilmington, not just in our United States, but in all the world, loving them as we love ourselves. That is the way to the Promised Land. Today we are invited to look over that land and then commit ourselves to the hard work of moving forward towards that land, sure in the knowledge that although we may not get there ourselves, our people will, and we can help them get there.

One of the hallmarks of our Reformed tradition is an understanding that the reformation isn’t over. It didn’t end with Luther and Calvin and John Knox. It is still with us today. There is a phrase that emerged among some early Reformed communities: *ecclesia reformata sed semper reformanda*, “the church reformed, but always needing to be reformed.” That Reformed understanding undergirds the notion of the priesthood of all believers, that we all of us are called to serve, not just some special class of professionals, but rather men and women together, poor and rich together, old and young together, people from every race and background and circumstance and outlook together. The power of the Reformation is that it did not simply happen five hundred years ago; it continued to happen, and it continues today. We still need reformation.

I sometimes get teased about my own use of what might be called inclusive language. You may have noticed that I often like to use Scripture translations and hymn arrangements that are gender inclusive, not because this is somehow politically correct, but rather because of our Reformed understanding that we are called to proclaim God’s word in the language that people can understand. Sometimes we will use traditional language. You’ll hear me use the King James language for many of the Psalms and absolutely for the story of Christmas and for Jesus speaking about the many mansions in God’s house, to name but a few. That language is beautiful and belongs in the church, and it has inspired generations, but language that is gender inclusive also belongs because for some people they cannot hear God’s word without it. We are called to proclaim God’s word so that it can be heard.

I also give thanks today for the ways that people in Green Hill have stood on the mountaintop and let the view of God’s Promised Land lead them to places and people they might never have encountered. Some of our people were at the Urban Promise banquet last Thursday. Our connection with Urban Promise began I gather with a couple who ventured out into neighborhoods others considered dangerous because God’s love in Jesus Christ burned brightly in their hearts and they knew

² Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “I See The Promised Land.” Sermon preached on April 3, 1968 at Bishop Charles Mason Temple, Memphis, Tennessee, in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, James M. Washington, editor. © 1986 Harper San Francisco.

they were called to act on that love by serving people in need and learning together with them. Others have supported mission in faraway places for the same reason of wanting to share something of God's vision for the world. Our mission is inspired by the vision of the Promised Land. Where else is God calling us to be today?

Yes, we look back and we also look forward. We've been to the mountaintop and we've looked over and seen the view. It is a view that can influence how we live our lives right now. It is a view that can challenge us anew as the church reformed and always needing to be reformed. As we look over God's Promised Land, what is it that we need to reform that we might become the people God is calling us to be?

Enjoy the view from the mountaintop. Then take that vision with you as we head back down to the valley.

Let us pray: O God, you have set before us the vision of your Promised Land, a land where we will love you and love our neighbors, a land where all your children will be fed and safe and free to worship you in peace with joy. Strengthen, challenge and encourage us as we continue the work you have given us to do, the continuing reformation of your church, that your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.