

Advent Lutheran Church
Living the Story
October 27, 2024
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36

I like my SUV to look just the way it did when I bought it. I work hard to keep it looking good. I'd never add anything on to it and certainly never affix a bumper sticker to it. However, if I was compelled to add one, I'd likely opt for something like the popular maxim "Plan your work. Work your plan."

I'm a big fan of planning out work. Whether it's a personal to do list or the shared work ahead in this congregation as we move toward our preferred future, I'm always planning. Without a clear plan and lots of good works aligned with the plan, there is almost no chance of reaching the overall goal.

And, so, I, perhaps like some of you, may be tempted to baptize this approach to life and attempt to use it in the life of faith. Wouldn't it be grand if we could just have a "Checklist Christianity?"

Imagine if we could just do the right number of the right religious tasks, and we'd achieve the goal of being good Christians. Except that, God didn't create a system whereby our good works earn us rewards points much less preferred seats at the heavenly banquet. That cannot be any clearer in a Christian service of worship than it is on Reformation Sunday in a Lutheran Church.

I know many of you came to church this morning expecting me to say something like, "we are gathered here today to celebrate Martin Luther's bold faith as portrayed in one of our favorite stories, particularly the one of him nailing his 95 theses to the door of the church." For some its impossible to imagine this day without singing A Mighty Fortress is Our God or without hearing about Martin Luther's daring act.

Since we've now done both, I am free to use the rest of my time however I like. Except that I imagine most of you would become quite uncomfortable if I chose to tell you everything that I think is wrong with the ELCA – even if that might be the most Lutheran or at least the most Luther-like Reformation sermon possible.

Instead, I'll pause here. And I'll invite you to know the story and to live the story. Which story? Well, since this series is focused on living a more spacious Christianity, I'll invite you to live several stories at once.

To start at the beginning story wise is to say that we are all invited to be part of God's story. We should live the Christian story – the story that is shared by all who follow the Way of Jesus, even if we behave and believe differently. This is what we share in common with the 2.4 billion Christians living today and billions who came before us. It's the big picture faith that you think of when we say the Lord's Prayer or the Apostles' Creed.

And we are to be in the Reformation Story, which for us, turns into the Lutheran Story. This is the exciting one today. It's why many people are wearing red. And we remember it started with a call to center faith. And that work of prioritizing faith meant challenging some of the ways people assumed church was worked because that of the ways they'd always experienced it.

Imagine going to church where you can get whatever you want for a price. The way indulgences worked evolved over time and became something Luther could no longer tolerate. Because of this, one of his reforms focused on ensuring people know that you can't buy your way to a better eternal destiny.

Additionally, we are welcome to join the Advent Story. It's a much newer story. Today we are celebrating 48 years as a congregation. Some gathered here know the full story well. Most, however, are more familiar with the story of the last decade or two.

Advent's story is a story of growth followed by decline, much like that of most mainline Protestant churches over the last 50 years. It, however, is a story that is far from over.

The Advent story is unique to this congregation. Years back, we adopted a mission statement of loving and living like Jesus. And, we continue to do just that. It guides who we are and how we engage in mission and ministry together.

Today, we learned that Advent has a brand-new purpose statement – a new way of living into our mission during this interim season. Advent is a growing church where all are welcome and discover ways to serve.

That sure sounds like a statement to nail, or tape, or tack, or otherwise post on the church door! And since folks no longer walk up to the front doors of churches like they once did, we should also place it on our many virtual front doors as well, including our website and social media.

While locating yourself in these larger stories you must not lose your own story. Your story overlaps with all of these stories and yet your story stands on its own. I invite you to think of how your story has been shaped by the Christian story, informed by the Reformation story, and influenced by the Lutheran story. And think also of how your story has been refined and renewed as you've become a part of the Advent story.

Be encouraged. You cannot work your way or buy your way closer to God's heart. God loves you and welcomes you just as you are. And, God honors your faith and showers you with grace.

Let me close with a confession. As soon as I arrived at Advent, I kept hearing that we were 47 and would soon be 48 and that we needed to begin preparing to celebrate our 50th birthday. All I could think is no, let's not rush to a big milestone that is years ahead. But maybe my hesitation was personal rather than pastoral. After all, it turns out that age is something Advent and I have in common.

Siblings in Christ, whatever your age and wherever you are on your journey of faith, know that you are invited to celebrate the Reformation and to join your story with Advent's story.

Amen.