

Sermons at the castle church Lutherstadt Wittenberg

November 5th, 2017 – The Gospel According to the
Castle Church



Sermon:
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Sermon design – the spoken word applies!

Dear congregation, I am grateful that I can be in this pulpit for my farewell sermon. During our time in Wittenberg, I have only been up here a few times – usually to set up the microphone for another preacher. I spent my time down there, below. Now it is my turn. My sermon is titled: *The Gospel according to the Castle Church* or *What I learned from 28 weeks in the Castle Church*.

Two things have been very clear:

First, you may take pictures here, but, please, **no flash!**

Second, here lies Martin Luther – he can do nothing else!

Yes, the questions of the summer were: “Where is Luther? Where is Luther buried?” Isn’t it interesting that so many people are looking for Luther’s bones, even though Luther was less than impressed with Frederick’s bone collection. Do people just want to find the dead Luther? Or dare we take something from Luther into our lives? Dare we wrestle with Luther over some of his ideas?

We do, though, have a living Luther. He is always standing – right over there – he looks up into heaven with confidence. I have learned that we want to have such a picture of Luther. We want our Luther to stand with confidence and courage and fortitude against the world and its powers – against the very things that can so easily cause us to waiver.

In the pop oratorio, “Luther”, we find Luther in Worms. After the first day, he has to ask Charles the Fifth

for more time to consider. The choir singing for the people asks” “Why is he just looking around? Why is he silent? Why does he hesitate? Why?” Later, they will sing and complain: “We thought that he would fight. We thought he would stand up. We thought he had courage. We thought he was strong.” Hesitation – a side of our hero, of any hero, that we really don’t like to see. The beloved Luther image held by visitors does not allow for hesitation. We need a strong man, who has the answers, who knows the way forward, who, without hesitation, wrote and sang “A Mighty Fortress”.

Even if we need an image of a courageous Luther, we have another image – just across the chancel. It is the image of his close associate, Phillip Melanchthon. He is looking down. Holding his theological masterpiece, the Augsburg Confession, thoughtfully, he looks down. “Why is he just looking around? Why is he silent? Why does he hesitate? Why?” Melanchthon is showing us, the Teacher of Germany is teaching us, that Reformation, that reconfiguring the relationship between people and the church was, is and will not be easy.

Yes, the Prussians, in the 19th century, could completely reconfigure the Castle Church. But Reformation means more than a new church building or having a new building configuration. Reformation is about the relationship between people and church, and this relationship is dependent on the relationship between God and people. And God, in Jesus, has reconfigured this relationship!

In this newly reconfigured church, there are many traces of God’s new configuration. For example, the Baptismal Font. With Pastor Metzner, we determined that Jesus is not in the correct place. He should be on either the east or the west side of the Font – facing the altar or the congregation. Instead, he is on the northeast side. I explained this situation to a visitor one day and she immediately said to me: “Of course, Jesus is not where we expect him to be! We will always find him in unexpected places.” Wow, I thought, a new Teacher of Germany right here in the Castle Church!

A second learning from the Font connects to the Bible verse that is written on it; “Let the children come to me.” The top part of the Font shows children being led to Jesus. This reminds us that in Baptism we become children of God. I think of the song in the Luther pop oratorio which goes: “We are all God’s children, regardless - forever, no one is alone. And we are also sinners, no one should be without hope – no one.” Right here in the Castle Church, in the middle of the chancel, right in front of the altar, right in front of Jesus, is the Baptismal Font. And, it is right with our baptism, that our life is connected with Jesus. And with our baptism, we know the we are never alone; with our baptism we know, hope is always with us.

Look at the exit. Almost every day I get asked: “Is that a confessional? I thought this was a protestant church!” “No”, I always answer, “That is not a confessional, it is just an exit.” And then I got to thinking ... on the other side of the door Luther posted his Theses, starting with Thesis One – “When our Lord and master Jesus Christ said, “Repent!” he meant for our whole life to be one of repentance.” Think about this: every Sunday, we leave the church through a confessional. So, as we leave, we connect our daily lives to his first Thesis and to a life that should be lived with repentance.

If we look to the front, we see that there are two figures on their knees. I have been told on many occasions that they look like Moors. No! They are the Prince-Elector brothers, Frederick the Wise and John the Steadfast. Both are on their knees facing Jesus. We know that Frederick was raised Catholic and probably re-

mained Catholic. We know that John was also raised Catholic but he became Protestant. Now these two, one a Catholic, one a Protestant, are shown in this church, together, on their knees, praying. Wonderfully ecumenical! Both have the same Latin phrase on their epitaphs: *verbum Domini manet in aeternum* (the word of God stands forever). These two powerful, and, yes, mortal, princes have turned to the living God in trust, on their knees in prayer and invite us to prayer.

My work at the Castle Church included ‘candle service’. We have a Peace Ring with places for 24 small candles to be placed around a larger peace candle in the center. A person takes a small candle and lights it from the peace candle and says a prayer. I had to make sure there always enough candles in the candle basket for the ring. I noticed how important this moment was for visitors – a moment in prayer, a moment in thought, a moment to spend with God. Yes, I know, you do not need a candle to pray to God; yes, I know you do not need to be in church to pray to God, but I valued our Peace Ring and the candles that led many to prayer and God.

Finally, the wonderful learning in the Castle Church – in the newly renovated, illuminated Castle Church – just as before, ***Jesus is in the center***. Look at the stained-glass windows above the altar. We see the birth of Jesus, the Crucifixion of Jesus and the Resurrection of Jesus. Our salvation history – God in Jesus coming to us; God in love coming to us; God with the promise of life, coming to us. In the sunlight, we clearly see salvation history in these windows.

But better than the light that comes through the windows, is the light that shines on Jesus. Jesus stands above the altar. He can be clearly seen whether the sun shines or not, whether it is 10:00 in the morning, 3:00 in the afternoon, or even 8:00 in the evening. With the new lighting, Jesus can always be seen. This was not always so. Look at older pictures or look through an old Castle Church guidebook – Jesus was often in the shadows. Now he can be clearly seen, and the darker it becomes in the church, the more Jesus shines.

This leads me to the last learning: In the new light of the church we see that Jesus will not allow himself to remain in the past. Jesus will not be a prisoner of history. No! He wants to come out into our present. Jesus comes to us and with Jesus comes God’s new configuration of the relationship between God and people. Jesus comes and through his birth and Crucifixion and Resurrection comes the possibility to be reconciled with God, the possibility to receive forgiveness. Look, Jesus invites us – to Baptism, to Holy Communion. Jesus invites us even though we know we are all sinners, that we have our hesitations, that we have our doubts. But we also know that we are God’s children and can live with hope. We are never alone – God in Jesus is with us and that is clear to see in this church.

We come into the Castle Church, we praise and thank, we sing and pray – wonderful! But we need not stay in the church, we can go out, through that exit, with our grace-filled relationship to God in our hearts and minds. We can go out, ready to share God’s grace with our words and deeds!

This is what I have learned in the Castle Church this summer. God in Jesus, God in love, is with us.

This is most certainly true! Amen