

# Reformation Day (Years A, B, C)

On Reformation Day the church honours Martin Luther and other reformers of the sixteenth century, and reformers of every age. Luther's teachings focused on the promises of scripture, emphasizing that the Spirit works in our hearts to speak God's word to us and that we receive God's grace through our faith in Christ. This is the truth that makes us free. Our life in the Body of Christ is shaped by this gift of freedom.

## Focus Scripture: John 8:31–36

Most scholars believe that the gospel of John was written around 85–90 CE. Jesus' identity and teachings are the priorities in this gospel. John draws us into the new life and understanding of God's purpose that Jesus makes possible.

Reflected in the focus reading today is the struggle within the early church between Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah and those who did not. This division was probably not as sharp in Jesus' time as the words in John might lead us to believe. When the gospel of John refers to "Jews," it usually is speaking of Jewish religious leaders. It may be helpful to think of the dialogue in John between Jesus and the Jews as a challenging discussion among "family members" who are experiencing a strained relationship.

Verse 30 is a springboard into the focus verses. Jesus has been teaching, and verse 30 reports: "As he was saying these things, many believed in him." Jesus' words to these new believers begin in verse 31.

Living in Jesus' way leads to truth, which in turn leads to freedom. The Jews are puzzled by Jesus' teaching and claim that because they are descendants of Abraham, they are already free. They claim they have never been slaves, neglecting to recall the time of slavery in Egypt or the Babylonian exile.

In John, the writer uses the phrase "very truly I tell you" (v. 34) to signal that a new teaching is to follow. In verses 34–36, Jesus addresses the group's misunderstanding of freedom with the new teaching that everyone who sins is not free and is a slave to sin. Jesus teaches that slavery is not limited to an economic reality, but also is an inward state of being. Even those who claim freedom through Abraham are not as free as they think.

Through Jesus, the Son, we are given a permanent place in the house of God. True freedom comes through Jesus the Christ, not any human ancestor. True freedom comes not from one's heritage, but as a gift from God. Truth for the Jews involved their identity in Abraham; Jesus' truth involves identity in God.

The leaders of the Reformation emphasized the gospel teaching that true freedom is not related to ethnic distinctions or social class. Only Jesus the Christ can free us from slavery to sin, and does so through the truth of the gospel.

Martin Luther felt that the heart of gospel truth is summed up in **Romans 3:19–28**. All people fall short in their relationship with God, but God offers forgiveness of sins through Christ. We are justified – put right with God – by the gift of God's grace, through faith in Christ.

The Hebrew exiles in Babylon blamed the slavery of exile on their ancestors who had disregarded God's law. In **Jeremiah 31:31–34**, the prophet envisions a future time when the ability to know God and God's truth will be a gift from God, written on each heart.

**Psalm 46** is the inspiration behind Luther's classic Reformation hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." The words of the psalmist, and the words of Luther, call disciples to place their hope in God alone.

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Scripture calls us to live with God's law on our hearts, to let our faith determine how we act. Jesus invites us to open our hearts to receive God's gifts of grace and salvation – to claim our freedom in Christ. What in the church today needs to be reformed by God's grace? What might you and your church do differently through the reforming, restoring power of the Holy Spirit?



**Focus Scripture**  
**John 8:31–36**

**Additional Scriptures**  
**Jeremiah 31:31–34**  
**Psalm 46**  
**Romans 3:19–28**

**Gracious God,  
write your law on  
our hearts and  
let your word of  
grace dwell in us  
so that no matter  
where we are, we  
may know we are  
forgiven and free.  
Amen.**

## The Focus for Ages 12–14

**Y**oung people aged 12–14 years are encountering increasing numbers of moral and ethical issues, both in their personal lives and in the wider world. As they begin to be more aware of these issues they engage in testing their own values and morals against both inner and outer standards. Increasingly complex situations mean that they have to make increasingly complex choices. Sometimes they seek direction from adults who are accepting and willing to be a sounding-board for helping discern the “right” choices. Often they want the freedom to make their own choices and decisions.

The younger teens in this age group are still fairly concrete thinkers and usually want some absolutes and “truths” as a basis for making their choices. By the age of 14 they have usually discovered that it is not always easy to know the truth of a particular situa-

tion, or to know what is the right thing to do. Things that seemed clear to them in childhood now seem less clear, with more layers to explore and deal with. They are more aware of the fact that words can be manipulated and that it is sometimes hard to distinguish truth from untruth.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus speaks about the relationship between truth and freedom. During the session young people can explore a different understanding of freedom and truth through Jesus’ teaching about the life of discipleship. Reformation Day offers an opportunity to learn more about Martin Luther and other church reformers who dedicated themselves to a way of living and being church that followed Jesus’ teachings. Pray that the young people will be open to explore the truth and freedom that is part of discipleship, of living in God’s way.

## Prepare

### Before the session

- Prayerfully reflect on the focus scripture, John 8:31–36, and biblical background material (p. 1).
- Set a worship space with *red fabric, large white pillar candle, and a Bible.*
- Bring *Bibles, candlesnuffer, matches, and, if needed, a CD player.*

### Gather

- Bring song “*God Grant that We May Be Transformed*” (#23 on *Seasons Music CD, volume 7*) or “*Fresh as the Morning*” (#3, *Seasons Music CD, volume 8*), or “*Jesus, Face of God*” (#4, *Seasons Music CD, volume 9*). All recordings also available as *Seasons mp3 downloads.*

### Engage

- Bring *copies of resource sheets “The Story of Martin Luther” (p. 5) and “Following in Jesus’ Way” (p. 6).*
- Bring *denominational information* about other important leaders of the Reformation (optional).

### Respond

Choose one or two options. Prepare and bring the materials.

- Faith stamps:** *art supplies, drawing paper, scissors, glue sticks*
- Magnetic messages:** *magnetic sheets (business-card size), card stock/heavy paper, art and craft supplies, fine-tipped markers*
- Collages:** *craft and collage supplies, teen magazines, news magazines, poster board, scissors, glue sticks*

### Bless

- Bring *tealights.*
- Bring song “*Somlandela/We Will Follow*” (#22 on *Seasons Music CD, volume 7*), or “*Stand, O Stand Firm*” (# 18, *Seasons Music CD, volume 8*), or “*I Send You Out*” (#23, *Seasons Music CD, volume 9*). All recordings also available as *Seasons mp3 downloads.*



# Reformation Day (Years A, B, C)

## Scripture

John 8:31–36

**FOCUS** To explore Jesus' teaching about discipleship, truth, and freedom.

## Gather

**Welcome** the young people and invite them to gather around the worship area. Point out the colour red in the worship space marking a special day and remind participants that today we celebrate Reformation Day, a time to honour Martin Luther and other key people who worked together about 500 years ago to reform some of the principles and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, which resulted in the development of the Protestant church.

**Gather** in the worship space and invite a volunteer to light the candle as a symbol of God's presence.

**Pray** O God,  
as we gather together today  
we open ourselves to your love  
and to the gifts of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

**Sing, listen to, or read** the words for "God Grant that We May Be Transformed" (#23 on *Seasons Music CD, volume 7*) or "Fresh as the Morning" (#3, *Seasons Music CD, volume 8*), or "Jesus, Face of God" (#4, *Seasons Music CD, volume 9*).

### Making connections

Invite young people to offer their own understanding of the word "freedom" by completing the following statements: "I think freedom means being able to..." and/or "I think freedom means not ever having to..."

## Engage

### Setting the scene

The gospel reading on Reformation Day comes from the gospel of John. It is part of a section in which the gospel writer has collected many of Jesus' teachings during the time he was in Galilee and Judea. In the first part of chapter 8, the writer describes Jesus' actions and teaching in the temple in Jerusalem, and the effect these had on those who were listening. Read **John 8:30**. In the next part of chapter 8 Jesus now speaks to these new believers.

### Moving into the story

Invite a volunteer to read **John 8:31–36**. Explain that the phrase "If you continue in my word" in verse 31 can also be translated as "If you live out in your lives what I am telling you..." The truth about which Jesus speaks is God's word and way that Jesus has made known in the way he lived his life and in the things that he taught.

### ■ What might Jesus be saying about truth and freedom in verse 32?

Slavery was very common in biblical times, and Jesus talks about freedom in terms of being set free from slavery.

### ■ What is the response of the listeners to Jesus' statement?

Invite a volunteer to read **John 8:32–33** again. These new believers are confused by Jesus' teaching. They claim they have never been slaves, forgetting that their ancestors were once slaves in Egypt. But Jesus is talking about a different kind of slavery, and a different kind of freedom. Read **John 8:34–36** from the Bible and then invite a volunteer to read a paraphrase of these verses from the section "Freedom is..." on the resource sheet "Following in Jesus' Way."

### ■ What kind of slavery is Jesus speaking about here?

### Connecting scripture with life

Jesus talks about sin being more than just doing something wrong or not doing something right. Jesus helps us to see that sin includes anything that separates us from God.

■ **What kinds of things can make us feel as if we have become slaves to “other ways”?**

Jesus taught that living in God’s way leads to truth, which can lead to freedom.

■ **What are some ways we can live in God’s way that could set us free from “other ways”?**

On Reformation Day we remember Martin Luther and other reformers in the church. Distribute copies of the resource sheet “The Story of Martin Luther” and review together. If desired, share information about other important leaders of the Reformation.

■ **What might Martin Luther have found encouraging in these words of Jesus?**

■ **How might Jesus’ words, “the truth will set you free,” have given Martin Luther the courage to speak up for change?**

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## Respond

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Choose one or two of the following options.

- Faith stamps** On Reformation Day we remember Martin Luther and other church leaders who helped people learn more about God and their Christian faith. In his teaching Martin Luther created a seal as a way of telling his faith story. Look together at the image of the seal on the resource sheet “Following in Jesus’ Way” and read the description of the symbolic shapes and colours. Invite young people to review the questions on the resource sheet and use the art and craft supplies to design their own faith stamps or crests. When finished share information about the creations with each other.
- Magnetic messages** Jesus’ teaching speaks of being set free to follow in the way of discipleship. Invite young people to create magnets



with short messages that summarize themes in the gospel reading and in the story of Martin Luther (for example, “God’s truth will set you free” or “Here I stand” or “Stand firm in God’s ways”). Distribute supplies and encourage group members to make several magnetic messages each, one to keep and others to give away as reminders of the call to follow in God’s way of truth and freedom.

- Collages** Jesus’ teaching helps to free people from following in ways that are not God’s ways. Read again the section “Freedom is...” on the resource sheet “Following in Jesus’ Way.” Invite young people to use the art and craft supplies to create two collages of images and words, one called “Living God’s Way” and the other called “Living God’s Way – Not.”

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## Bless

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**Gather** again in the worship area. Invite young people to reflect on the work of Martin Luther and other leaders of the Reformation movement that encouraged people to learn more about faith. Invite them to think about what it means to them to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Have them take turns lighting tealights and place these in the worship space, forming a pathway leading from the central candle, as a symbol of their commitment to live in God’s ways.

**Sing, listen to, or read** the words of “Somlandela/ We Will Follow” (#22 on *Seasons Music CD, volume 7*) or “Stand, O Stand Firm” (# 18 on *Seasons Music CD, volume 8*), or “I Send You Out” (#23 on *Seasons Music CD, volume 9*).

**Close your session** by inviting group members to spend a few minutes in silence, thinking about how they might follow Jesus in the coming week.

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## Reflect

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In what ways did youth express an understanding of Jesus’ teaching about truth and freedom to live as followers of Christ?

How might you continue to support them in their discipleship?



# THE STORY OF MARTIN LUTHER

**W**hen Martin Luther was born about 500 years ago, most people had very little education. Many weren't able to read and there weren't very many books around. Books had to be copied out by hand which took a long time, and was expensive. Only the priests in the churches had access to Bibles, which were all written in Latin.

Martin Luther wanted an education and he started in law school. One day, when he was returning to school after a vacation, he was caught in a fierce storm. As the thunder and lightning crashed and flashed around him he was very scared, so scared that he cried out, "I will become a monk if God can save me from this storm." Suddenly the storm stopped and Martin believed this was a miracle, a sign of God's presence. So he left law school and went to a monastery to become a monk.

When Martin began to study the Bible, in preparation for teaching at the university, he started to question some of the things he had been taught about God and about belief. Martin saw new meaning in some of the verses he had read so many times before. One thing Martin now believed was that he didn't need to try and

earn God's forgiveness by being good; instead, he now understood that God's forgiveness was freely given. Martin was excited by this idea and shared it with other students and professors.

But some of the church leaders weren't too pleased with Martin's new ideas and teaching about God. They wanted to build a new church in Rome and were busy raising money for this by "selling" God's forgiveness. They would tell people that if they gave money to the church, the punishment for their sins would be cancelled. The church leaders certainly didn't want people to hear that forgiveness was free!

Martin began to make a list of other complaints, or problems he had with the way things were in the church. By the time he was finished there were 95 items, which he called "theses." On October 31, 1517, when he was 34 years old, Martin took this list and nailed it to the door of the church in his city. He challenged everyone to begin discussing and debating them.

The church leaders were even more furious, and Martin was ordered to take back all the things he had written. He refused. "Here I stand," he said.

"God help me." Martin was arrested, but on his way home from the trial his friends "kidnapped" him and hid him where he was safe.

Although he was now excommunicated (which means he wasn't allowed to be part of the church) Martin wanted to help people understand more about God and faith. He began translating the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek into German so people could read it and decide for themselves. He also wrote teaching materials, called "catechisms," with questions and answers to help children and adults learn about the Christian faith. Martin wrote many hymns that we still sing in church today.

Martin never planned to start a new church. In those days all Christians belonged to the Roman Catholic Church and Martin just wanted to reform this church. But as he continued to stand up for the truth as he read it in the Bible, and the church leaders refused to change, Martin and his followers realized they had no choice but to leave. And so began the Protestant Reformation, and the beginning of the Protestant churches.



# Following in

## *Freedom is...*

Seriously, I tell you, if you don't follow God's way you can become like a slave to other ways.

But if you listen to me, I can bring you back to God's way and you will be free from those other ways.

When I make you free, you are really free.

A paraphrase of Jesus' words in John 8:34–36

## DESIGNING A FAITH STAMP

### Martin Luther's Seal

The cross shape in the middle of a red heart is a reminder to believe and live our faith from our heart.

The heart is in the middle of a white rose (Luther's favourite flower), symbolizing that faith gives comfort and peace.

The rose shape is surrounded by blue, the colour of joy and hope.

The whole seal is held within a golden circle, which symbolizes eternity.



**Before you begin to design your own "faith stamp" think about the following:**

- What overall shape will your stamp be? Why?
- What symbol will you put in the middle? Why?
- What other symbols will you use to describe yourself as a follower of Jesus? Why?
- What colours will you use? What do these colours mean to you?

# JESUS' WAY