

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 6–8

Children aged six to eight love drama and dramatic stories of lives lived big. On this day they will have a chance to celebrate the life of someone who lived life to the full. The story of Martin Luther is one of the great stories of the Christian tradition. Today's session can help children learn how Martin Luther made such a difference to the Christian way, and perhaps be inspired by his life story in their own journeys of faith.

Children in this age group are concrete learners and it is helpful for them to have something they can take away from a session and use later to link back to the story. Martin Luther's seal is a wonderful example of such a symbol. It not only has an important place within the story, but it also carries within it

the heart of his teaching – something we want the children to remember, along with the drama of the story. The resource sheet "Martin Luther's Seal" (p. 6) provides you with the image of the seal and a description of the six main elements of the seal to help you in the discussion with the children. The six parts of the seal are presented with statements simple enough for the children to understand. Invite children to share their own understanding about the symbolism of the seal. They can be your teachers when it comes to appreciating a statement like "We can trust in Jesus to show us God's way." Pray that Jesus will be a guide to God's way for these children, just as Jesus was for Martin Luther.

Prepare

Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on the focus scripture, John 8:31–36, and biblical background material (p. 1).
- ❑ Prepare a worship area with *red fabric*, *white pillar candle*, and *Bible* with a bookmark placed at John 8:31–36.
- ❑ Bring *candlesnuffer* and *matches*.
- ❑ Bring *CD player*, if possible.
- ❑ Decorate the room with *red items* (such as streamers, paper hearts, balloons).

Gather

- ❑ Bring song "Circle Song" (#11 on *Seasons Music CD, volume 7*) or "We Thank You, God" (#22 on *Seasons Music CD, volume 9*); both recordings also available as *Seasons mp3 downloads*.
- ❑ Make *two small signs*: one saying "No way!" and one saying "Yes! That's right."

Engage

- ❑ Bring *resource sheet "Meet Martin Luther"* (p. 5) and many *paper heart shapes* and *buttons*.
- ❑ Make a *copy of the seal* illustration from resource sheet "Martin Luther's Seal"

(p. 6), enlarging if possible; colour as indicated by the description of the symbols; cut the symbol into separate pieces.

Respond

Choose from the following suggested activities. Prepare and bring the materials.

- ❑ **Bookmark:** *bookmark-lengths of wide red ribbon, small pieces of felt, white paper, scissors, staplers*
- ❑ **Story bags:** *small plain paper bags, art and craft supplies, glue sticks; if possible, make arrangements for photocopying.*
- ❑ **Edible seal:** *copies of resource sheet "Martin Luther's Seal" (p. 6), sliced bread, pieces of dried fruit, cream cheese, butter knife, large tin or other cutter, coloured pencils or markers*

Bless

- ❑ Bring song "God's Family" (#12 on *Seasons Music CD, volume 7*) or "Following Where Jesus Leads" (#14, *Seasons Music CD, volume 8*); both recordings also available as *Seasons mp3 downloads*.



Reformation Day (Years A, B, C)

Scripture

John 8:31–36

FOCUS To celebrate Reformation Day through the story of Martin Luther.

Gather

Welcome the children and invite them to notice all the red decorations. Explain that red is a colour that is used for special days in the church year. Mention that today we are celebrating Reformation Day. It is the day we remember Martin Luther, who brought the good news of the Bible to many, many people.

Opening ritual

Gather in the worship space and invite a child to help light the Christ candle.

Pray the following prayer, inviting children to repeat each line after you.

Dear God,
as we gather in this circle today,
help us to learn more about
following in the way of Jesus
and showing your love. Amen.

Sing “Circle Song” (#11 on *Seasons Music CD, volume 7*) or “We Thank You, God” (#22 on *Seasons Music CD, volume 8*).

Connecting life and theme

On one side of your meeting space place the sign saying “Yes! That’s right” and on the opposite side place the sign saying “No way!” Invite the children to play a game where they will move to the signs to indicate their agreement or disagreement with statements such as “Soccer/football is fun to play; I love pickles; Brushing teeth is important; I think everyone should come to church.” Talk together about how it is easier to share how we feel about things like pickles but it can sometimes be harder to share what we believe about more important things.

Engage

Preparing for the story

Explain that on Reformation Day we celebrate changes that took place in the church about 500 years ago. Martin Luther was one person who stood up for what he believed in and helped make those changes.

Bible story

Use the resource sheet “Meet Martin Luther” to tell the story. Explain that Martin Luther created a seal to help people remember some of the things that he taught about Jesus and God. Distribute the pieces of the seal (from the resource sheet “Martin Luther’s Seal”) and invite children to help you put the pieces back together, like a puzzle. Explain the meaning of each piece as you complete the seal.

After the story

When Martin read the Bible and prayed, he grew to love God more and more. Martin wanted everyone to know about God’s great love, so he

would tell the stories of Jesus from the Bible. These stories helped show people how to live in God’s way. They can help us to live in God’s way too. Invite children to sit in a circle and recall some stories from Jesus. Be prepared to help the children name stories. As each story is named, place a heart in the middle of the circle. Invite children to take turns throwing a button into the circle. If it lands near the middle of a heart, help children think of one way Jesus’ stories can help us as we learn to follow God’s way. Continue until there is a button on each heart.

Poem Jesus told his followers: “If you keep on obeying what I have said, you truly are my disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (**John 8:31**, *Contemporary English Version*). Encourage children to create actions as you read the following poem:

This is our Bible, our special book.
Open it up and take a good look.
Stories of God's people from long,
long ago.

Stories of Jesus that we want to know.
Knowing God's story will set us all free.
Free to make choices – free to be me!

Respond

Choose one or more of the following options.

- ❑ **Story bags** Jesus told people stories and encouraged them to follow his teachings. We can share Jesus' teachings with others too. Invite children to make "story bags" to hold a list of stories about Jesus. First invite children to help you make a list of as many Bible stories as they can remember. Distribute paper bags and art and craft supplies and invite children to decorate their bags with drawings of their favourite Bible stories. While they are doing this, make copies of the list of the stories, using a photocopier if possible, and give one to each child to place in their story bags. Encourage children to share some of these stories with a friend.
- ❑ **Bookmark** Martin Luther encouraged people to read their Bibles. Invite children to make a Bible bookmark. Demonstrate how to make a miniature book by cutting a small rectangle of felt to



be the cover. Cut three pieces of paper the same size as the rectangle. Place on top of the felt and fold the felt and paper in half to form a tiny book. Place two long pieces of ribbon inside the back of the tiny book to form a bookmark and staple the closed "book" near the folded edge. Help children make their own bookmarks and encourage them to use these to help mark stories of Jesus' teaching in the Bible.

- ❑ **Edible seal** Martin Luther's seal is a reminder of some of the things Luther taught about God and Jesus. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "Martin Luther's Seal" and ingredients and help children make edible seals following the instructions. Affirm the children's efforts and enjoy eating together. Encourage children to colour their paper copies of the seal to take home as a reminder of today's story.

Bless

Gather in the worship area. Ask the children to form a friendship circle. Recall that today we heard about how Martin Luther shared Jesus' teaching with others.

Pray the following prayer, inviting children to repeat each line after you.

Thank you, loving God,

for people like Martin Luther
who help us learn more about God's love. Amen.

Sing "God's Family" (#12 on the *Seasons Music CD, volume 7*) or "Following Where Jesus Leads" (#14 on the *Seasons Music CD, volume 8*).

Send each child out with the words, "(Child's name), go and share God's love with others."

Reflect

How well did the children connect with the story of Martin Luther? In what ways can you continue

to honour the children's experience of and language for God's freeing love?



MEET MARTIN LUTHER

Story Tip

It is important to tell a story as you feel it. If you enjoy it, the children will too.

Martin Luther lived a long time ago in a little town in Germany. When he was 17 years old he went to a university to study. Martin's father wanted him to study law, but Martin was more interested in knowing more about God. Instead of staying in law school, Martin left and entered a monastery to become a priest.

It was in the monastery that Martin found a Bible – the first Bible he had ever had a chance to read! Martin spent long hours studying the Bible and praying to God. The more he studied, and the more he prayed, Martin realized that many people loved God, but they did not know all the good things God wanted for them.

Martin wanted people to be able to read the Bible for themselves so they would know about Jesus and God's gift of love for everyone. But how were they to do this? Bibles were very hard to get and few people could read them. At that time, the Bible was written in a different language most people couldn't understand.

So Martin decided to do something about it. He translated the Bible into German. Then, everyone in his country could read and understand it. And he wrote many, many books as well. Some of those books were meant for parents so they could help their children know God's love.

One day, Martin wrote a list of 95 things he didn't like about what the church taught. Martin nailed the list to the church door for others to read. Imagine. This was how people often let others know how they felt about things! Many in the church wanted Martin to change his mind about what he had put on the door. But Martin said, "No!" Martin wanted others to know the truth about God's love and forgiveness. Martin was serious. There was no way he would change his mind. And because of that, Martin was no longer welcome in the church.

But it never stopped Martin. Martin continued to teach, and write books and hymns about his love for Jesus and God's love for us.

Other people had questions and wanted to change what was taught in churches, too. They started new Christian churches. One of these churches was called the Lutheran church, even though Martin Luther didn't want it named after him.



Martin Luther's Seal

A picture can communicate a lot of important ideas, without using a single word. Martin Luther created a seal, or emblem, that helps us to remember some of the things he taught about God and Jesus.

Colour the image (*right*). Show the image to the children. Focus on one symbol at a time, and talk about its meaning. Encourage the children to give their own interpretations before adding your own.

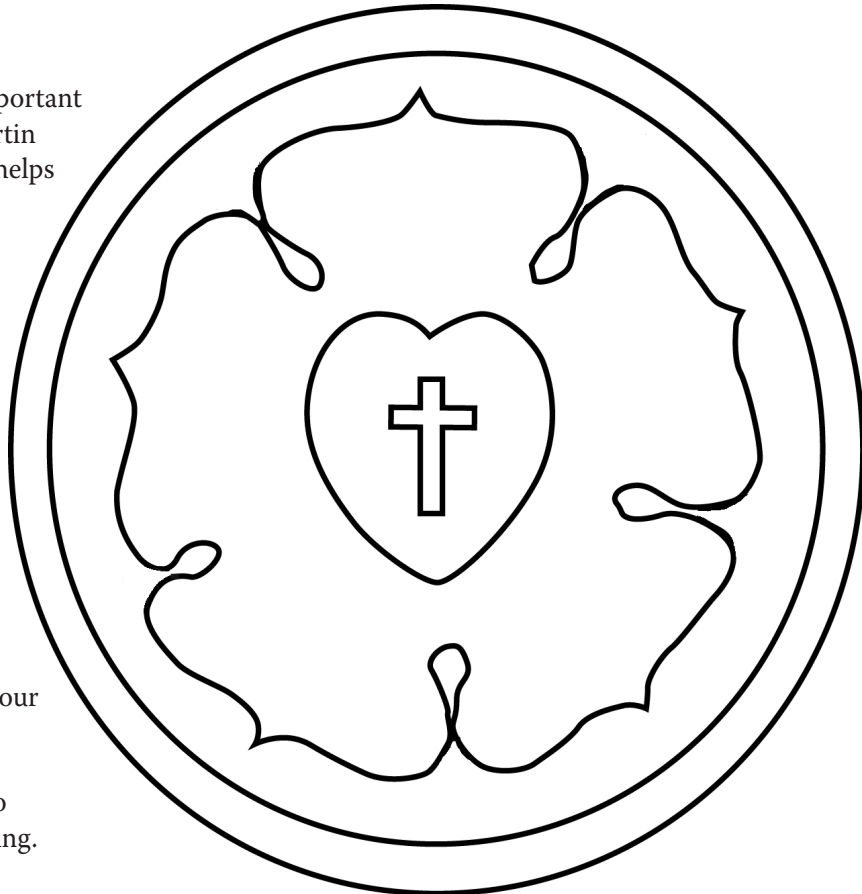
Black cross: Jesus died on the cross.

Red heart: God loves us.

White rose: We can trust in Jesus to show us God's way.

Blue background: This peaceful colour reminds us of heaven.

Golden ring: God's love for us has no beginning and no ending.



MAKE YOUR OWN EDIBLE SEAL

Ingredients:

Slice of bread; dried fruit such as golden and dark raisins/sultanas, cranberries, apricots, apples, shaved coconut; spreadable cream cheese

Materials needed:

Large empty can or large round biscuit/cookie cutter, butter knife, small plate

Instructions:

1. Use the empty can or biscuit/cookie cutter to cut a round circle from the slice of bread.
2. Spread cream cheese on the circle until it is all covered.
3. Use the different coloured pieces of dried fruit to make a seal of your own using (a) symbol(s) that remind you of something important about God and Jesus (heart, cross, dove, circle, flame...).
4. Show your creation to the group, and explain why you chose the symbols you used.
5. Eat and enjoy!