

# 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.

**Psalms 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**  
**Psalms 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.**

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## The Focus for Adults

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Adults have experience with people who aren't quite "integrated"—they behave one way at work and another at home, or they say one thing and do another. Sometimes the world seems to encourage adults to play different roles: nurturing mother at home, tough manager at work, get-out-of-my-way driver on the road. On Reformation Day, the church celebrates the legacy of Martin Luther and the reforms begun nearly 500 years ago. Luther called church leaders to account for the ways that their actions were not integrated with God's word. As you prepare to lead, pray for group members, that all might grow in under-

standing the ways that God's word is at work in your lives each day.

The focus text today speaks of freedom. Expect a wide range of opinions about the meaning of this word. For some, *freedom* is wrapped up with national politics, and the struggles and sacrifices made to secure national independence or political freedom. Others will perceive *freedom* as a sense of personal liberty – being able to do whatever one chooses to do. Others will think of *freedom* as a sense of material security – freedom from want. Allow plenty of time for group members to wrestle with the meaning of this important concept in Christian life.

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## Prepare

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### Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on this week's scriptures — Jeremiah 31:31–34; Psalm 46; Romans 3:19–28; John 8:31–36 — and biblical background material.

### Gather

- ❑ Prepare the worship space with *red fabric* and a *candle*. Bring *matches* or a *lighter*.
- ❑ Bring a *variety of magazines* to cut apart, at least one per person, and *scissors*.

### Engage

- ❑ Bring *copies of the biblical background material* for this session.
- ❑ Bring a *Seasons of the Spirit poster* that suggests the theme of *freedom*.
- ❑ Bring *copies of "Free Indeed,"* one of the resource sheets for this session.

### Respond

- ❑ **On our hearts:** no additional materials needed
- ❑ **A Mighty Fortress:** *copies of "A Mighty Fortress,"* one of the resource sheets for this session; *hymnal or songbook your church uses*
- ❑ **Reform:** *newsprint, markers*

### Bless

- ❑ Bring *hymnal or songbook your church uses*.



# Reformation Day (Years A, B, C)

## Scripture

John 8:31–36

**FOCUS** To confess our reliance on God’s grace and mercy.

## Gather

Welcome group members by name.

### Opening ritual

Gather around the worship space and light the candle. Note the red fabric used for Reformation Day, a commemoration of the legacy of Martin Luther and the church reforms begun nearly 500 years ago. Form two groups and read aloud **Psalm 46**, alternating verses.

### Moving into the theme

Distribute magazines and invite group members to cut out words or pictures that express the meaning of *freedom* for them. Form pairs to tell about the images chosen, then place them in the worship space. Invite pairs to share interesting points from their conversation with the group. Allow a moment for group members to ponder silently:

- **What kind of freedom are you longing for today?**

## Engage

### Set the context

Today’s focus text is from the gospel of John. Jesus’ identity and teachings are the priorities in this gospel written about 85–90 CE, after the other gospels were written. Read aloud John 8:30. Jesus has been teaching, and many believed in him. Jesus’ words to these new believers begin in verse 31. Distribute copies of the biblical background material and invite group members to refer to it as you dig into the texts.

### Explore the texts

To introduce the readings for today, distribute copies of “Free Indeed” resource sheet and form three groups to read this choral reading. After reading, note that the focus text – **John 8:31–36** – is found in Group 1’s lines. Group 2’s line is **Jeremiah 31:33**, and Group 3’s is **Romans 3:28**.

- **What does it mean to have God’s word written on one’s heart?**
- **What is the relationship between God’s word and freedom in Christ?**

Focus first on **John 8:31–36**. Jesus speaks of a slavery that goes beyond being captive to the powers and principalities of the day.

- **For you, what word or phrase best describes the kind of slavery Jesus is describing?**
- **What is your understanding of verse 34?**

- **From what is Christ freeing us? How is Christ able to do this?**

Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Romans 3:19–28**, commenting that Luther based many of his theological teachings on Romans. Check other Bible versions for translations of key words and phrases as you discuss:

- **What does Paul say about the notion of being “a slave to sin”?**
- **What is the role of God’s grace and mercy in the freedom we have in Christ?**
- **What words would you use to explain verse 28 to a group of young people preparing for Confirmation (Affirmation of Baptism)?**

Spend a quiet moment viewing the *Seasons of the Spirit* poster you have chosen. Then discuss:

- **What does the artist who crafted this work suggest to you about the nature of freedom?**
- **What is involved in the process of attaining freedom?**
- **What in this image seems to support Jesus’ teaching in John 8:31–36 and Paul’s teaching in Romans 3:19–28? What in this image seems to work against their words?**

The freedom Jesus speaks of is not necessarily the freedom we might crave. It is not necessarily freedom from oppression, suffering, or stress.

- **How do you understand what it means to be free in Christ?**
- **Luther said that a Christian is the most free person of all, subject to no one, and also the most dutiful servant of all, subject to everyone. Do you agree or disagree? Why?**

### Make life connections

Shortly before he died in 1546, Martin Luther wrote, "It's true. We're beggars."

- **How might Luther's words be considered a commentary on what he believed about God's grace and mercy?**
- **What feelings do you experience when you consider the mercy and grace you have received from God?**
- **For what are you and your church being freed? In what ways might your neighbour be served through this freedom?**

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## Respond

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Choose one or two of the following options:

- **On our hearts** We live at the mercy of God's grace, which enables us to follow Christ and live in the freedom Christ gives. In **Jeremiah 31:31–34**, the prophet reports God's promise to place God's law within us, writing it on our hearts. In some churches, when the gospel text is read, the worshippers make the sign of the cross on their head, then on their lips, and then over their hearts. This gesture is a physical testimony to God's word at work in their lives. What gesture would remind you that God's word is written on your heart? Form pairs to create a gesture or sign to use in times of personal prayer or public worship. Share these during Bless.
- **A Mighty Fortress** In **Psalms 46**, the psalmist sings of the God's power and mercy. Distribute copies of "A Mighty Fortress" resource sheet

to learn more about the hymn that this psalm inspired Martin Luther to write. Refer to the hymnal or songbook your church uses as you discuss the questions. If some are inspired to write a hymn to rally Christians today, find a way to share it with the congregation.

- **Reform** In 1517, Martin Luther nailed his "95 Theses" – points of discussion – to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. This list included church practices that Luther felt needed to be changed. The Spirit's work of reformation is ongoing. What items might be included on such a list today? Work as a group to create a list on newsprint of things in your church or denomination that you think need to be reformed. What might you do to prompt a discussion of these items?

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## Bless

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**Gather** again in the worship space. Invite group members to share any new insights they've gained from your study and discussion, and to name any questions that remain for them. Share any worship gestures or hymns created during Respond.

**Pray** together the prayer from the biblical back-

ground material: 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.

**Sing or read** "A Mighty Fortress" or other hymn that captures the theme of change or reformation.

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## Reflect

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What new understandings of Christian freedom were lifted up by the group today? In what ways might the group follow through on some of their

ideas about what it means to live in freedom, extending love and mercy to others?



# Free Indeed

(Based on John 8:31–36, Jeremiah 31:33, and Romans 3:28)

**GROUP 1:** Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples”;

**GROUP 2:** I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

**GROUP 3:** For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

**GROUP 1:** “and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

**GROUP 2:** I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

**GROUP 3:** For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

**GROUP 1:** They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?”

**GROUP 2:** I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

**GROUP 3:** For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

**GROUP 1:** Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there for ever.”

**GROUP 2:** I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

**GROUP 3:** Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

**GROUP 1:** “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

**GROUP 2:** I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

**GROUP 3:** For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.





# A Mighty Fortress



**A** "Mighty Fortress Is Our God" is probably the most well-known of the hymns that Martin Luther wrote. The German title of this work is *"Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott."* Luther wrote the words between 1527 and 1529. While some 19th-century scholars questioned if Luther wrote the music to the hymn, scholars now believe that Luther did compose the tune for this famous hymn.

This hymn has been translated into almost every known language. In English, there are at least 70 translations. The first English translation was done by Myles Coverdale in 1539 with the title, *"Oure God is a defence and towre."*

## The story of "A Mighty Fortress"

It is reported that, at times when the Reformation movement was struggling, Luther would say to Philip Melanchthon, "Let's sing Psalm 46." Melanchthon was a leader in the Reformation with Luther, as well as a personal friend. "A Mighty Fortress" draws its inspiration from Psalm 46.

"A Mighty Fortress" has been called the "Battle Hymn of the Reformation." Its words inspired the first followers of the Reformation. When early Protestants were forced into exile, this often was the hymn they sang as their rallying call.

■ **If you were to compose a hymn to rally Christians today, what scripture would you use as a foundation for your work?**

## Luther and music

There is a story about Luther, when he was a student, earning money by singing in the streets of Eisenach, in present-day Germany. Whether or not this is true, it is clear from Luther's writings that singing was important to Luther, who also played the lute. Luther wrote a fair amount about music and its important role in Christian worship, education, and personal devotion. One of Luther's well-known statements about music is "Music is an outstanding gift of God...I place music next to theology and give it the highest praise."

Luther wrote at least 35 hymns in addition to "A Mighty Fortress." Look for other Luther hymns in the index for authors and composers in your hymnal. Choose a few of Luther's hymns to read or sing.

■ **What themes are prominent in these hymns?**

■ **What words and phrases speak to you most powerfully?**

