

Biblical Background • Reformation Day – Years A, B, C



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.

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 Holy 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 day 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.



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?



Reflecting on the Word

Connecting with life

- What words or images express freedom for you?
- What kind of freedom are you longing for today?

Scripture

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?

The gospel also speaks of a freedom we can know in Christ.

- How do you experience this freedom in your own life?
- How does it enable you to “love out Love’s passion”?
- What in the church needs to be reformed so that all people can know this freedom and grace?
- What is your heartfelt prayer to the reforming, restoring power of the Holy Spirit?

Romans 3:19–28 is a central text of the reformation tradition, and it encouraged the early reformers to extend God’s grace in radical ways.

- What is the role of God’s grace and mercy in the freedom we have in Christ?
- How might the contemporary church extend grace in ways that are radical today?
- In what ways does your congregation give love to others freely, like a gift?

Luther said that a Christian is the most free person of all, subject to know one, and also the most dutiful servant of all, subject to everyone.

- Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Connecting scripture and life

- For what are you and your church being freed?
- For what ways might your neighbour be served through this freedom?

Shortly before he died in 1546, Martin Luther wrote, “It’s true. We’re beggars.:

- How might Luther’s words be considered 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?

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 in such a list today?



Reformation Day

Prepare

NOTE: All of these suggestions are mere starting points; adapt, delete, and add according to your local needs.

- ❑ Recruit volunteers needed for worship: one to help with gather, a soloist for after the words of affirmation, one for the John reading, and a storyteller for “Meet Martin Luther,” three for the prayers of the people.
- ❑ Bring pencils, paper and removable adhesive.
- ❑ Prepare the media presentation for prayer of confession.
- ❑ Bring song “Spirit of Life” (page 35 *Seasons Songbook*, vol. 7, and available for purchase and download at www.seasonsonline.ca).
- ❑ Decide which stations you will set, and set stations as described on pp. 8–9.

Music Suggestions

Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom

Ruth Duck, Donna Kasbohm; *Seasons Songbook*, vol. 7

Spirit of Life

Carolyn McDade, Grace Lewis-McLaren; *Seasons Songbook*, vol. 7

In Full Flight

Sean Gilbert and Jill Scott; *Seasons Songbook*, vol. 6

We Come to the Hungry Feast

Ray Makeover; *Seasons Songbook*, vol. 6

Be Still and Know

John Bell

Grace Alone

Scott Wesley Brown and Jeff Nelson

A Might Fortress

Martin Luther

Gather

Have pieces of paper and markers available on a table. As people gather for worship, invite them to consider the following question: What is one change you pray the universal church would make as we face the future? Write a word or phrase summarizing this vision and tape it near the entrance of the worship space.

Call to worship

(inspired by Psalm 46)

The Loving One is our constant help
therefore we are not afraid.

Mountains shake, the sea roars,
and the world we have known changes,
but God’s love is steadfast and forever.

In stillness we know the love of God.

Here a stream of gladness flows
bringing Love into our midst.

The world outside is uncertain;
nations war and leaders fall from grace,
but God’s love is steadfast and forever.

In stillness we know the love of God.

Come and see the work of God
who brings peace to the people of earth.
In God’s name, war comes to an end,
and the weapons of war are silenced;
truly God’s love is steadfast and forever.

In stillness we know the love of God.

Opening prayer

Still our hearts, O God,
and make us aware of your loving presence.
Open our hearts to your teachings,
that your ways might become our ways
in every moment of our lives
and with every beat of our hearts.

Prayer of confession

Create a slide show with photographs of your community such as a cityscape, farmland, or pictures of need. Project these local images one at a time. Prior to the spoken prayer invite the congregation into a time of silence as these pictures are projected and instrumental music is played.



Worship Outline • Reformation Day – Years A, B, C

God, when we stand at the edge of brokenness
and allow our questions of faith
to distance ourselves from you and others,
forgive us and free us.
When the ways we live as the church
limit our ability to offer compassion,
forgive us and free us.
When we try to be “holy”
without changing the way we are with others,
forgive us and free us.

Words of affirmation

If possible, have a soloist sing “Spirit of Life” (page 35 Seasons Songbook, vol. 7).

The face of God we seek is a face of compassion,
steadfast in love, and longing to forgive.
Receive the power of God’s compassion
so that we might have the capacity for love.

Engage

Opening the word

John 8:31–36

Invite someone to portray Jesus and read this paraphrase of the gospel text responsively with the congregation.

JESUS: If you obey my teaching, you are really my disciples; you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

ALL: **We are descendants of Abraham, and we have never been anybody’s slaves. What do you mean, then, by saying we will be free?**

JESUS: I am telling you the truth; everyone who sins is a slave of sin. A slave does not belong to a family permanently, but a son or daughter belongs there forever. If the Son sets you free, then you will be really freely.

Always being reformed

On Reformation Day this, we remember a minister named Martin Luther who lived a long time ago in a country called Germany. Luther had a vision for the Christian church and how we might live together. Luther wrote down his dream

on a piece of paper and nailed this paper on the front door of a church. The leaders of the church read Martin Luther’s thoughts and vision and knew the church would have to change in order to live out this dream. Read some of the visions and hopes for the church people wrote down during the gathering time. Conclude by wondering how the church might need to change, or be reformed, in order to live out these visions and hopes.

Meet Martin Luther

Have a storyteller tell the story “Meet Martin Luther” on p. 7. The story comes from the 5–12 age-level resource. Children love to hear a story more than once..

After the story

Invite children, young people, and all who wish to move to the stations. Others will remain seated for proclaiming the word.

Respond

After proclaiming the word, you might invite those who have not already done so to move to and around the stations, taking ten minutes or so with a chosen practice.

Prayers of the people

ONE: We come to you, God, bringing our dreams,

TWO: bringing our longing to be whole,

THREE: bringing our deep questions.

ONE: We have so many “whys” God.

TWO: We know we won’t be satisfied
even if we could handle the answers,
even if you could give them to us.

THREE: So we come looking for a way
to love you in the midst of our questions (*pause*).

ONE: We want to listen for you in the quiet,
and in the noise of our lives.

TWO: We want to look for you in the hopes of others.

THREE: We want to respond
to your signs of love around us (*pause*).

ONE: Heal our world in pain
from religious misunderstanding, violence,
and the gap between the rich and the poor.

TWO: Heal our families and communities
as we each try to show love each day.

THREE: Heal our church as it struggles to live your law,
show your mercy, and witness to your justice (*pause*).



Worship Outline • Reformation Day – Years A, B, C

ONE: Allow the work of our hands
to bring praise to your name.

TWO: Allow the movement of our hands, feet, and hearts
to offer love to others.

THREE: Allow our hands at rest and in motion
to bring kindness to ourselves.

Offertory prayer

Giver of Life,
prosper the work of our hands in faith.
Prosper the work of our gifts
offered in gratitude.
Prosper the joy of our life
in following the Christ.

Bless

Invite people to take one of the visions for the church that were posted during the gathering time.

May the warmth of God's presence go with us all.

May the light of God's law bring us joy in relationship.

May we dance in community worshipping God.

Go forth in presence, in joy, in community.

Special Day Commentary

October 31 – Reformation Day

On the night of October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses – a proposal to debate the doctrine and practice of *indulgences* – to the castle church door in Wittenberg, Germany, beginning what became known as the Protestant Reformation. Accordingly, this date has significance for churches of the reformed tradition.

Luther chose this night knowing that many people would be attending church the next day – All Saints' Day – and would thus read his statements of concern about the church. Some Protestant churches not of the reformed tradition choose October 31 (or the Sunday prior) to honour "Saints of the Reformation Era," broadening the observance to include others.



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 Melancthon, “Let’s sing Psalm 46.” Melancthon 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?**

Meet Martin Luther

Read
the story
several times
so you can
tell it in your
own words as
though you
were telling
a family
story.

A long, long time ago in a little town in Germany lived a boy Martin Luther. When he was 17, his father sent Martin to the university to study law. But Martin was not interested in law, Martin wanted to know more about God. So Martin left the law school and entered a monastery to become a priest. At the monastery with many other men who wanted to know more about God, Martin Luther was able to read a Bible for the first time. Bibles were rare and so valuable that many churches chained them to the pulpit.

At the monastery, Martin studied the Bible and prayed to God. The more he read the Bible, the more Martin realized that lots of people loved God, but they did not know all the wonderful and good things God wanted for them. Martin dreamed of a time when all the people could read the Bible like he did so they would know about God's gift of Jesus for everyone. What a dream! Most people could not read, and the Bibles were written in languages that those who could read couldn't understand.

Martin had another idea. He would translate the Bible into German so the people in his country could read about God's love for themselves. He wrote other books too, books to help people understand the Bible and books to help parents teach their children about God's love.

The more Martin studied and prayed, the more he realized that some things were happening in the church that didn't fit with what he was learning about God's love. Martin made a list of those things. One day in October, about 500 years ago, Martin nailed this list of 95 things to the church door, where public notices were placed.

Some people tried to talk him out of what he said, but Martin said, "No." Martin Luther wanted everyone to know the truth about God's love and forgiveness. He was serious; because he could not change his mind, the church said Martin was no longer welcome to be part of it. That didn't stop Martin either. He kept right on writing books and hymns, teaching, and learning more about Jesus and God's love for us. Some people agreed with Martin and wanted to change some of what was taught in the church. They started new Christian churches. One of these is the Lutheran church, even though Martin Luther did not want it named after him.



Living, Learning, Growing as Disciples

The following stations might be set up around your worship space or in other places around the church. Choose one or more practices, depending on your space and numbers. If leaders will not be facilitating at these different stations provide copies of the directions, or display the directions where the participants can see them.

Mural panels

Materials four lengths of mural paper, coloured pencils or markers, sticky or masking tape, copy of resource sheet “A Mural about Martin Luther”

Setting the space Set out a couple of tables, pencils, markers, and copy of resource sheet. Make a copy of the directions and place where all can see.

The practice of telling our story

Directions

1. Read the information about Martin Luther on the resource sheet “A Mural about Martin Luther.”
2. Form four teams, which can be made up of one or more people.
3. Have each team take one block of text, sheet of mural paper, pencils and markers.
4. Illustrate your scene.
5. When finished join the scenes together to make one long mural.

Digging deeper

Materials Bibles, paper and pencils

Setting the space Set out table, chairs, paper and pencils. Make a copy of the directions and place where all can see. Adapt the questions to fit the translations used.

The practice of Bible study

Directions

Find John 8 in the Bible. This is in the gospel of John, near the beginning of the New Testament.

When Martin Luther studied the Bible, he read one or two verses and thought about them for a long time. Read John 8:31–32.

1. Think about or talk together about these questions.

- **Who do you think were the Jews who had believed in Jesus?**
- **How can we be disciples of Jesus?**
- **What is the truth that Jesus taught?**
- **How will Jesus’ truth make us free?**

There are many ways to think about these questions. Luther never stopped asking questions of the Bible.

- **What questions do you have?**



Bookmarks

Materials bookmark lengths of wide red ribbon, small pieces of felt, white paper, scissors, staplers.

Setting the space Set out table, chairs and materials. Make a sample bookmark. Make a copy of the directions and place where all can see.

The practice of creativity

Directions

Martin Luther encouraged people to read their Bibles. Make a Bible bookmark like the sample on the table.

1. First make a miniature book by cutting a small rectangle of felt. This will be the cover.
2. Cut three pieces of paper the same size as the rectangle.
3. Place on top of the felt and fold the felt and paper in half to form a tiny book.
4. Place two long pieces of ribbon inside the back of the book to form a bookmark and staple the closed “book” near the folded edge.
5. Use your bookmarks to mark stories of Jesus’ teaching in the Bible.

Collage

Materials sheet of poster board, magazines, craft and collage supplies, glue sticks, scissors

Setting the space Set out table and chairs and materials. Make a copy of the directions and place where all can see.

The practice of following in God’s way

Directions

Martin Luther had a strong desire to explore God’s words and wisdom in the Bible. Jesus said: “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)

1. Think of some ways we can follow in God’s way today.
2. Create a group collage, using the supplies provided to illustrate what it means to be one of Jesus’ disciples today.



A Mural about Martin Luther

A Martin Luther lived in Germany over 500 years ago. Martin loved God and loved the church. Even as a child, Martin tried to follow God's way. Martin worried because he felt that he was not following God.

B In those days, some people believed that if you did something wrong, you could pay money to the church and you would be forgiven. When Martin Luther was a young man, he spent many hours studying the Bible. Martin read about God's forgiveness in the gospel of John. The gospel said that forgiveness was free if you believed in God. What a wonderful gift!

C The more Martin Luther thought about what he read in the Bible, the more upset he became with the church. Finally, he wrote down 95 things he thought were wrong about the church. He nailed this list to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, so others could read it. Church leaders argued with Martin, but they could not convince Martin to change his mind. Martin Luther wanted everyone to be able to read the Bible and know the truth of God's love and forgiveness.

D As time went on, other people agreed with Martin Luther. New churches began that encouraged people to read and study the Bible to learn about God's love and forgiveness. Whenever we hear or read God's word from the Bible, we can remember that Martin Luther discovered that we cannot buy God's love and forgiveness. It is ours because of Jesus.



Martin Luther loved telling bible stories to his children and he wrote books so all people could read the stories in their own languages. Cut and fold this little story book. Think of

some of the stories in the Bible and draw some pictures in your book.

