

<sup>31</sup> *And the remnant who have escaped of the house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward.* <sup>32</sup> *For out of Jerusalem shall go a remnant, and those who escape from Mount Zion. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

Text: Isaiah 37:31-32 A 10/22/17 Reformation Philippians 3:4-14 John 8:31-36 Psalm 119:XII-XIV Responsive Psalm 119:124ff.

Hymns: 262, 296, 477, 294

## **GOD'S ZEAL FOR HIS FAITHFUL PEOPLE**

### **1. He makes us take root downward**

### **2. He makes us bear fruit upward**

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ,

This October 31st will mark exactly 500 years ago that Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, by which God set in motion the Reformation. To commemorate this 500th anniversary, we'll have Reformation-based themes this Sunday and next Sunday. The church in Luther's day had deteriorated terribly. The average person knew very little about what the Bible says. Many of the teachers of the Word didn't know much about it either; or if they did, their knowledge was warped and confused with the added teachings of men. The situation had been much the same in the days when the faithful Prophet Isaiah and good King Hezekiah came upon the scene. Most people's religion was shallow and lifeless. God's zeal moved and shook the people during Hezekiah's and Isaiah's time, and during the Reformation in Martin Luther's time. God's zeal is every bit as powerful and active on behalf of His faithful people today!

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What percentage of the people in the world do you think believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin? What percentage of the Jews in the Old Testament do you think trusted in God for their eternal salvation? Why did God have to make the children of Israel wander around for forty years in the desert? Why did God have to allow the Babylonian Captivity and the many, many other afflictions of His people? Why was Jesus' birth announced to shepherds, instead of in Jerusalem where all the 'religious' people were supposed to be? Why are there so many warnings to the churches in the books of the New Testament against false teachings and sinful living? Why the need for a Reformation – a complete change in the church – in Luther's day? Why have so many churches become nothing more than social clubs in our day? In churches which still preach the Gospel, how come they're not filled to overflowing? When we study about the Church in the time of the Old Testament through the time of the Apostles, of Martin Luther, and up to the present, we realize that the number of faithful Christians in the world has usually been small, a "remnant."

*"And the remnant who have escaped of the house of Judah shall again take root downward."* God sent King Hezekiah and the Prophet Isaiah to turn His people back to Him. Most of the Jews wouldn't listen. But God saw to it that there was at least that "remnant," that small group of believers, faithful to Himself. So many of the people had starved themselves spiritually by their neglect, and for many, their rejection, of God's Word. But through Isaiah and Hezekiah, God brought His Word back to His people to make faith take root and grow in their hearts.

God had to do the same in Luther's day. Because the church kept the Bible in Latin, the people couldn't hear it in their own language. Luther translated the Bible into their native German so that everyone in his country could know what it says. God used His Word to "again" make the faith of many "take root downward."

We want to be faithful Christians. Our faith, too, must "take root downward." In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus warns against being like the one "who hears the Word ..., yet has no root in himself, but endures only for a while" (Mt. 13:20-21). When he faces opposition to God's Word, or due to life's troubles, or because he has fallen in love with the world, he allows his faith to die. A root system must be nourished in order to develop well. We want our faith to be well-rooted and firmly grounded in Jesus and His Word. As your pastor, I continually pray that the Lord will bless us all in this way.

It's very sad to talk to someone who claims God is important to him but whose life and attitudes clearly demonstrate that his love for God has grown cool, or even cold. Luther said that the spread of the Gospel is like a rain shower. It comes to people with its rich blessings. But when it is no longer appreciated, it moves on. Luther expressed concern that the Gospel shower was already moving out of his beloved Germany even during his own life time. What about the "Gospel shower" in America, and for each of us? Do we understand and appreciate what God has given us, or will we let it pass on?

"Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy." That's not just a good idea, that's the Third Commandment. What are my priorities in life? How important is God to me? What do I really want for myself and my family? What a gracious God we have to continue to provide us and our children with all the opportunities He does to hear His Word! Each week we have church and Sunday School and Bible Class. We have our Bibles to study at home, for ourselves and with our families. "Lord, give us eyes to see what great treasures You have given us as members of Ascension Lutheran congregation, and of our Church Of The Lutheran Confession. Move our hearts to take every opportunity You give us to dig into Your Word and grow in faith!"

There had been a careless attitude toward God and His Word before Isaiah and Hezekiah came, and before Luther came as well. God knew it had to change. "The remnant ... shall again take root downward." "If you continue in My Word," our Savior tells us, "then you are truly My disciples" (Jn. 8:31). "Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it" (Lk. 11:28). "Blessed is the man [whose] ... delight is in the law" (the Word) "of the Lord, and in His law" (His Word) "he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water" (Ps. 1:1-2). God taught His Old Testament people, "Hear, O Israel, and be careful to observe [My Word], that it may be well with you.... You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" (Deut. 6:3, 5-7).

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"And the remnant ... shall again take root downward and bear fruit upward." Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without

*Me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5). “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5:16).*

It was a period of great blessing for the Church when God through Hezekiah and Isaiah, and again later through Luther, brought change and growth. People got to hear the Gospel again. They learned anew the precious truth that we’re all sinners who are saved by faith in the Son of God who gave His life for us. “*Rooted*” in the truths of God’s Word, they “*bore fruit upward.*” The faithful were filled with the Savior’s love, and zeal for His Word. They once again knew how to worship and live in a God-pleasing way. They treasured God’s Word. They stood up for it; for Luther and other reformers, for the Lutheran princes, and for others even with the on-going threat of the loss of their lives. They continued to faithfully bear witness to God’s Word.

God always keeps at least His “*remnant*” of people who are faithful to Him. We’re a small congregation in a small church body. The group of faithful Christians is a small minority in the world. Sometimes we become discouraged, and sometimes we face opposition because of the Gospel. But our God, who makes us “*take root downward,*” is also working in us to make us “*bear fruit upward.*” By God’s grace we treasure the truths of His Word. In Sunday morning Bible Class we have begun our periodic study of how we can be better witnesses of Christ and His Word. We would dearly love to have our congregation and church body grow in size, that more may join us in this blessed fellowship we enjoy in Christ and His Word.

There was a time when King Hezekiah and the people of Israel were faced with a seemingly overwhelming challenge of defeating the huge army of Sennacherib, King of Assyria. Hezekiah placed his trust in the Lord and encouraged his fellow Jews to do the same, and the Lord delivered them. Hezekiah and the rest of the “*remnant*” among the Jews were faced with the challenge of removing the idol worship and restoring godly worship among their people. God’s faithful people placed their trust in Him, and He enabled them to bring it about.

What does the future hold for us as a congregation and for our church body, and for us as Christians in general facing the world’s growing opposition? How will we, a “*remnant,*” meet the challenges we face? “*The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*” Keep looking to the Lord. He will continue to lead us and guide us. Keep supporting God’s kingdom work here with your prayers and your regular attendance and offerings and efforts. By God’s grace, and with the strength He gives us, we will continue to faithfully proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This has always been the way – the only way – God has restored and revitalized His Church and made it grow; in Isaiah’s and Hezekiah’s day, in Luther’s day, and still today. “*The remnant ... shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*”

We conclude with words from the Apostle Paul, which also speak for me as your pastor. “*I thank my God ... for your fellowship in the Gospel ..., being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in [us] will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. ... And this I pray, that [our] love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that [we] may approve the things that are excellent, that [we] may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Philip. 1:3a, 5a, 6, 9-11). Amen.*