

What was I thinking?

October 31, 2021



Reformation

On October 31, 1517, a German monk called Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses on the door of All Saints' Church, Wittenberg, in what we now consider the official start of the Protestant Reformation.



All Saints' Church, Wittenberg

Luther's main beef with the Catholic Church had to do with the selling of indulgences, meaning for a price, the church would forgive one's sins, or at least reduce the time of punishment in purgatory. An old saying of the time was, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." Luther's theses were written in Latin but were soon translated in German. As history would have it, it was quickly printed, copied, and widely distributed thanks to the new printing press. Luther's writings spread across Germany and then throughout Europe within a couple of months. I guess that was the 16th-century version of social media.



Luther's theses

I spent some time with the Lutherans just before coming to Athens, and I was told many times that Martin Luther didn't really intend to start a new denomination, he simply wanted to reform the church. As we know now, that's not what happened. Maybe Luther learned what we know now from our social media posts - once you put something out and it starts to spread, there's no stopping it.

As the movement spread it split into different branches, including one led by a reformer called John Calvin. As Presbyterians, we find our roots there, as Calvin influenced John Knox of Scotland.

I am well aware of another holiday observed on October 31, one loved by children of all ages, including me. On or around this day, it is sometimes requested of me and other organists to play a certain piece of organ music by a famous Lutheran, Johann Sebastian Bach. I'll confess my "sins" first and say that I have played that piece for Halloween, just for fun, especially since our son loves it. I played and recorded it last year on a Saturday morning and shared it on Facebook, much to the delight of over 1,000 viewers. But I must admit I cringe a bit at the stereotypes that piece of music has when it comes to Halloween, horror movies, *Phantom of the Opera*, and Disney's *Fantasia*. All of that has made it hard for people to take that piece of music seriously. Though there has been some doubt as to whether Bach actually wrote it, we still assume, for the most part, that he did. If so, he did not write it for a movie or anything else associated with horror or All Hallows Eve. It's simply and exciting piece of music (or it can be, depending on who plays it!).

I have a special memory of Bach's *Toccata*, and it was not in October, but in the summer of my first year in this church. I was asked to give a presentation on the organ for a group in our church, the Senior Adult Ministries if I remember correctly. It was an opportunity for church members to get to know me a little, and a chance for me to show off and explain our wonderful organ, with the walls taken down to make the console visible, and the lights turned on to show the inside of the organ chambers. I explained and demonstrated the great variety of sounds and colors our organ can produce. Since this was meant to be a particularly audience-friendly event, I ended with Bach's famous *Toccata and Fugue in D minor*. It's always a crowd pleaser. But what I will never forget is that the host and emcee of that event was our beloved John Kipp. John introduced me and then sat down on the front row, smiling enthusiastically the whole time, as John did. I ended the program with Bach, and as I finished the fugue and stood to acknowledge the applause, I looked over and saw John Kipp with tears running down his face. I wasn't expecting that. He was moved by the music. Maybe he and I forgot about the stereotypes. Maybe I forgot that piece usually causes eyes to roll, not fill with tears. Instead, we just got lost in the music of Bach. I don't know what happened that day, but it was something bigger than just me playing the organ. Something else took over, God, I assume, and I simply became an instrument through which beauty was communicated. At any rate, I will always remember that piece in that special moment.



As we acknowledge Reformation Sunday tomorrow, we will be singing one of the most famous of traditional hymns, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. It is one (of many) English translations of a hymn by Martin Luther. In the early printings, it was simply called “The 46th Psalm,” because it is based on that psalm: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” I don’t know if I can think of words more appropriate in our troubled times.

And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us.

There are many things in our present world that seem like they will undo us, but as Luther and the psalmist remind us, God is our mighty fortress, our rock, our refuge, and our strength.

God be with you till we meet again.

John