



In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: The Word of God that is the text for this message is from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 40 verses 6 through 8, where we read:

*A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.*

Earlier this year for our Lenten midweek devotions, in commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the launch of the Reformation, we took a careful look at what are known as the “sola’s” of the Reformation (sola being the Latin word for “only” or “alone”. To refresh your memory, they are:

1. *Sola scriptura*, Scripture alone: the principle that the inspired, infallible, and inerrant sacred Scriptures are the Church’s only source of divinely revealed truth.
2. *Sola fide*, faith alone: the truth that God counts sinners righteous not based on their works (which are all sinful and unworthy), but rather by their trusting in what Jesus accomplished for our salvation by his perfect life, innocent suffering and death, and resurrection from the dead.
3. *Sola gratia*, grace alone: the fact that God’s work of salvation for sinners is based solely on *his* goodness, mercy, and favor, quite apart from any merit or worthiness in us.
4. *Solus Christus*, Christ alone: the truth that the sole object of the Christian faith is Jesus Christ – and specifically the Jesus Christ whose person and work are revealed in the sacred Scriptures.
5. *Soli Deo Gloria*, to God alone the glory: the logical conclusion that says since God does all the work for our salvation, he gets all the credit. We can take none.
6. *Crux sola est nostra theologia*, the cross alone is our theology: the offensive truth that we are not to look for God where we would like to: in success, prosperity, health, well-being, and the other things that are attractive to us; but rather where he reveals himself and his gracious disposition toward us most clearly: in the cross and crucified body of our Lord Jesus.

Together these six “sola’s” are a good summary of what the Reformation was all about. The western Church of the sixteenth century was violating all of them in whole or in part. It was recognizing other sources of divine truth like man-made traditions, mystic dreams and visions of monks and nuns, and papal decrees. It was teaching that a person’s salvation depends on faith in Christ *and* their good works. While it taught that salvation is by God’s grace alone, it had changed the meaning of grace. It was no longer the unmerited favor of God, but rather a power that God gave you that enabled you to do works that were meritorious in his sight and therefore

counted toward your salvation. Christ alone was not the object of faith, but rather Christ *and* the saints, and Mary, and relics, and pilgrimages, and days of fasting, and a hundred other things. Because you did part of the work for your salvation, God didn't get all the credit for it. You got some too. And finally, people were encouraged to seek God and his favor in the things that appear attractive, that stroke the human ego, that give us ground for boasting; and not in the place God directs us to see him: the ugly, shameful cross of Christ.

Five hundred years later, I'm sad to report, we who hold to the six "sola's" are just as divided against the church that excommunicated Luther and the other reformers for the high crime of attempting to correct its errors. Sad also is the fact that we are divided against other church bodies that claim to be heirs with us of the Reformation, but that have in one way or another "gone full circle", so to speak, and have surrendered on the six "sola's" at least to some degree. To be sure, even in our own Lutheran circles, the temptation is always there for us to do the same; which is why the work of reforming the Church never really ends. There's a reason we call the Church in this world the Church Militant. Wherever the true Church is found in this world, Satan will be setting up shop from within it continuing his campaign of sweet sounding lies and appealing deception to lead the unwary astray. We must be ever vigilant.

With that in mind, I thought I'd throw another Latin phrase at you. It's the one that became the battle cry of the Reformation. It's this: *Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum*, the Word of the Lord endures forever. It appears in the passage I read from Isaiah 40. In its original context it is a sure word of promise from the Lord. Prior to where it appears in Isaiah's writings, the prophet has been describing some pretty dire things. He's been telling of God's coming judgments against the nation of Israel on account of their unfaithfulness. He's foretold the destruction of Jerusalem and God's temple within it. He's revealed that a remnant of God's people would be taken into exile far away from the Promised Land. For those who would be alive when these prophecies were fulfilled, it would seem like the end of the world – as if the Lord had abandoned them, as if he had reneged on his promise to bring the Savior into the world through the descendants of David. It would seem to them that all was lost.

The point of the passage is that God's Word endures despite what you see, despite how grave and frightful the circumstances in which you find yourself are, despite how hopeless the situation seems. God's justice, his plans and purposes, and his ultimate salvation for his people will prevail. And in the chapters that follow in Isaiah's prophecies, the Lord reveals how he is going to accomplish his will through one who is designated his Servant. This Servant will be the One who would do what Israel failed to do: remain completely faithful to the Word and Commandments of God. And through his sufferings, the Servant would bear the sins of the people so that through him many would be counted righteous.

The Servant is Jesus, of course. And even in his own ministry, as Isaiah's prophecies were being fulfilled, there came a point when all seemed lost. When on the cross Jesus bowed his head and released his spirit, his followers lost all hope. As the two Emmaus disciples later reported, "We had thought he was the one who would redeem Israel". The implication being, "Boy, were we wrong!" They were wrong; but not about that. They were wrong in thinking that the death of Jesus was the end of the story. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. And the Word of God endures forever.

Luther's recognition of the unfailing power of God's Word was at the very center of his theology. He believed that God's Word of Law and Gospel remains true in spite of all attempts to place conditions upon it or cover it over with human traditions. For Luther, the Word of God was living and active. In speaking his Word, God not only promises to forgive and justify

sinner, but also enacts forgiveness and justification on sinners by creating faith in their hearts and minds. Those redeemed by Christ are then able to live in freedom by the power of God's faithful Word.

For this reason, *Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum* took on a very special significance in the Lutheran Reformation. As early as 1522, Frederick the Wise, Luther's prince, ordered the phrase to be sewn onto the official court uniforms of himself and his courtiers. Frederick's successors in the court of electoral Saxony continued the practice. Later, in 1531 when the Lutheran princes gathered themselves together in the Schmalkaldic League for defense against the Catholic Emperor who wanted to force them back into the Church of Rome, the phrase became their official motto. It appeared on armor, flags, cannons, and other objects. By adopting this motto, the League confessed that God's redemptive promise of the Gospel could not be thwarted. Even if the Emperor was able to overcome them through military might, the redemptive Word would vindicate them on Judgment Day.

Shortly after Luther's death the Schmalkaldic League was defeated by the Emperor. Its leaders were imprisoned and threatened with death. But they refused to renounce their faith in the freedom of the Gospel. And the Emperor soon discovered that no amount of earthly might could force his subjects back into the Law heavy, burdensome tyranny of the Church of Rome. The simple Gospel that Luther had taught of salvation by grace alone through faith alone had spread too far and wide. The Word of God won the day.

And so it will in our day as well. We face different challenges: hostility from the so-called New Atheists, an increasingly secularized culture that trivializes our faith and openly opposes our Christian morality, liberal teachers within the Church who undermine the authority of God's Word or who come up with new and novel reinterpretations of it so that it means exactly the opposite of what it says, and sadly, growing levels of apathy and spiritual laziness within our congregations. These and other threats will continue to assault us. The devil isn't done with us yet. But in the end, he will lose. And he knows it. The truth is that he's already been defeated by the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. His power to accuse us is through. We've been set free by Jesus. And whom the Son sets free is free indeed.

Therefore, let us continue in the freedom of the Gospel to do the work the reformers started, for the Church is ever in need of reformation. Let us be watchful. Let us be vigilant. And let us be faithful to the Word of God that endures forever, for in this is our hope and our salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***