

An Invitation: Hebrews 4:12-16

It's Reformation Sunday. This is the Sunday we remember and celebrate the day in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed 95 "theses" or "proposals" on the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg, in Germany. This day is remembered as the birthday of the Protestant Church, the day of separation from the Roman Catholic Church. But it's good for us to remember at the same time we sing Happy Birthday to Protestantism, that Martin Luther had no intention of founding a new church. He didn't really even care to reform the old church. He proposed no new programs, suggested no new structures, rewrote no by-laws. Nor did he promise to make the world a more just and peaceful place.

What he did do was attempt to remove all false practices and traditions that were keeping the believer from encountering a graceful and loving God. It is often said that Luther challenged the Pope's practice of "selling indulgences" – a kind of "buying forgiveness" -- to finance the Vatican's earthly projects. That's true. But Luther's point was not so much that the earthly church was corrupt, but instead that indulgences were theologically wrong because they proposed that we have an *angry* God who needs to be *bought off*. Luther instead invited believers into a direct and personal encounter with a *merciful* God. Luther condemned *anything* getting in between people and God's mercy.

That's a thumbnail version of the story! My point is that what was so radical and refreshing five hundred years ago, remains challenging and provocative for us today. How many of you came

here this morning convinced that you might actually *right here* encounter a life-transforming God? If you didn't say "yes" to that question, what's in your way? Why wouldn't you believe it? What needs to be looked at and maybe *re-formed*? This is what Luther fought for five hundred years ago: You! Not a new church, but a new relationship between you and your God!

So I want to talk with you today and for the next couple of Sundays about worship. I want you to hear what worship can be and should be about: 1) gathering to meet our awesome God; 2) encountering a life-changing God; 3) and then responding in gratitude and praise to that same amazing God as you prepare to leave this place and go out into the world.

You know what? The world today is in deep need of persons who aren't just *hanging in there*, but who have direct and personal experience with God, who can bring that awareness into the world believing they have something to do in the world – and have been given exactly the resources they need to do it! After all, who was Martin Luther? We know where he came from. He was just a bible teacher in a backwater university. Who was Martin Luther to stand up to Rome and the Vatican and the Pope? Who was Martin Luther to post 95 theses on a cathedral door? He was just a man who discovered that he had an awesome God!

Now, why would you want a new relationship with God? I do not make any assumptions about your old relationship. I do not fault you if you are simply seeking or wondering what this faith thing means. I don't blame you if you are wondering what it all adds up

to at this point in your life. What we call faith isn't a boxed set of beliefs. It's not something you can buy or collect and display on a shelf! It is an ongoing, deeply personal, loving conversation between you and the God who formed you and thought of you before you were even conceived! And as Christians, it is a conversation with our Master Jesus, about living our days on earth with courage and joy. I say simply that there is a difference between you alone and you with God!

Let me illustrate the difference this way. There's a wonderful little book I've been reading called *Sara: The Foreverness of Friends of a Feather*. The book is supposedly for children, but I suspect that it's truly meant for adults like myself who grew up too fast and too serious and need some remedial training in what it's like to be a child. A child, you see, hasn't forgotten yet about mystery and wonder.

In the book there's a girl named Sara, who is kind of feisty, grumpy and a loner. Sara meets an owl named Solomon and begins a tutorial in living freely. The first lesson is about flying, something Sara longs to do. Now, listen up for a sec because this is important. Sometimes I think we come to church hoping that worship can help us adjust our lives and fix the world. So if you listen to our prayers, the ones at least that we speak out loud, our prayers are all about illness or loss, asking for this or that goal, praying on someone's need, interceding in the pain of families and against the carnage on our city streets, thanking for some longed for gift, requesting guidance in times of stress. There is nothing wrong with any of these things! Scripture continually invites us to ask for what we need – to ask, knock, open!!!

But if you really listen, if you really listen, how often do you hear us asking for the kind of relationship with God that would give us the power not to be diminished by injustice and suffering of the world, but instead to live out the very justice and mercy we cry “help” for?

Praying the “old” way, worshiping the way we get accustomed to doing, is like gazing up at a beautiful bird soaring far overhead and saying to yourself, *I’d love to fly. Gee, I wonder what that’s like? I can dream, but – these hands, these feet, this weight! -- I’m not meant for soaring!*

Suppose you were meant for soaring? Can you pray about that? Can this be the invitation at the heart of worship?

Here’s the lesson Solomon begins to teach Sara. Sara tells Solomon that she’d love to fly. Solomon asks her to tell him why. Sara answers as we might answer, *Well, it’s boring being stuck on the ground not being able to see farther than what’s in my face, and school is boring and my brother is a pain, and anything has got to be better than this.* Solomon points out to Sara that she still hasn’t said what she *wants*; she has only said what she *doesn’t* want. That stops Sara in her tracks and after a moment of hemming and hawing, Sara finally responds that she would love to be up in the air able to see it all – home and school, cars and streets, streams and hills, people and animals – and, most of all, she passionately would love to feel the power of the wind under her wings holding

her up as she cruises through the air. All of a sudden, Sara feels herself lifted up – and she is flying!

It's an analogy, folks. A metaphor. And that means you can do it, too! Do you come to church because things on the ground are tough and because you just want to pray for less of what you don't want? Or somewhere deep inside you, do you come asking to fly? Do you believe that if you want to see the whole thing – your story and all its connections so that you no longer feel like a victim – you can ask and it will be given you? Do you trust that if you want to feel the wind under your wings keeping you and sustaining you free and joyous – you can ask and it will be given you?

Or do you come simply wanting to adjust how things are on the ground for you? Let me ask you the popular question: *How's that working for you?*

I come here – yes, I am the preacher but I am also most emphatically a human being in need of an awesome God – I come here to know once again *who God is* and therefore *who I am*. Because, you see, I tend to forget. I tend to get mired in my stuff – my hurts, my fears, my sadness, and I make my timid prayer that God might fix a few key things in my life to make my life *manageable*. I forget that I have a God who wants to make my life *awesome*. That does not mean I will not experience hurt or loss or regret. It means I will know what to do with hurt, loss or regret and how even in these things I am loved and free.

If only I will tell God I want to fly!

St. Francis of Assisi had a prayer he said every night before he laid down to sleep. It's not his famous prayer, *Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace*. Nope. I'm told he asked every night in his cell, on his stone bed, *Lord, who are you? And who am I?* He trusted that the question had an answer, and that the answer would change him while he slept.

What a beautiful image! We come here to praise and celebrate a God who is already at work in us doing what we ask for! Even while we are about our other business! We rise and shine – God is at work! We pray and sing – God is at work! We rest and take a load off – God is at work! We do life – God is doing whatever it is that God does!

If we will only tell God we want to fly. That's the invitation at the heart of worship! Some of it is up to those of us who plan worship. We plan and put together an experience that is more than an intellectual investigation. We pray that you will feel invited to speak directly to God with conviction. Or, as the passage from Hebrews says this morning, you will approach the throne of grace *with boldness*. We believe that worship is that "two-edged sword" that cuts to the chase, bringing you into the presence of a God who will open your heart.

But in the end, it's up to you. What sort of God do you know?
What sort of God do you want to know? Can you get closer? Can
you be bold?

Here's an invitation! Ask God to lift you and put the wind under
your wings! That's where the Reformation began nearly five
hundred years ago. That's where the Reformation begins again
today: in your asking. It was never about making a new church! It
was always about making a new you! *And me. **And us as a
people willing to be the change we pray for!***

Amen