

Suttons Bay Congregational Church March 23, 2019

Psalm 118:1-14 The Rev. Dr. Robin L. Carden

It was one of those bright, crisp December mornings when I walked to the small bus stop in Sandweiler to catch the bus to the large train station in Luxembourg City, Luxembourg. It was 1995, the first semester of my junior year as a student at Miami University, and I was studying abroad. The semester was drawing to a close and I had one last place to visit for the independent project I had designed. As part of the project I was visiting a historical site related to each of the three most well-known reformers of the Protestant Reformation—Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli. My friend Matt Musteric, now a Lutheran pastor in Pemberville, Ohio, and I had, a few weekends before, traveled to Switzerland to visit the chapel where John Calvin preached and taught in Geneva. From Geneva we traveled to Zurich to visit the church where Ulrich Zwingli had preached. I am grateful to Matt for going along with me on that trip. Strangely none of our other usual travel companions were up for a tour of Reformation sites and they went to Amsterdam that weekend, instead. (Imagine that college kids wanting to go to Amsterdam instead of to churches while they're studying abroad . . .) But, Matt was willing. He was also part of the pre-seminary fellowship at the campus ministry center back in Ohio. (Yes,

there was such a thing. No, we didn't have t-shirts indicating our membership in such an esteemed group.) I was so glad to not have to make that trip alone because not only is Matt funny as all get out, but he also distracted the guard in Zwingli's chapel so I could sneak up into his pulpit.

But alas, not even Matt could be persuaded to go to the German city of Worms with me that Saturday in December, which I could totally appreciate. After all, Worms is not a well-known travel destination. It's about an hour southwest of Frankfurt in the south western part of Germany. And yet, Worms is where I wanted to go because it was the place where, about three years after nailing his 95 theses to the door of the Cathedral in Wittenberg thus, unknowingly, setting off that which would become the Protestant Reformation, Worms was the place where Luther would be put on trial for heresy as a result of what he had written and preached about the corruption and unscrupulous nature of the Catholic Church and the Papacy. This trial was known as the Diet of Worms which has got to be one of the funniest names for any historic event ever but back then a "diet" was not a means of torturing one's self through denial of one's most beloved edible treats but rather an assembly of leaders functioning as a kind of jury and judge. In this case, leaders of the government and church were the plaintiffs and Luther the defendant.

When called upon to denounce what he had said and written. Luther refused. When called upon to further defend himself Luther declared, “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other. May God help me. Amen.

It’s the “Here I stand, I can do no other” part that really got me. I had read those words in a biography about Luther for my project and I wanted to see the place where he stated them. But then, when studying for this sermon, I came across new information on this whole “Here I stand bit” . . . “There is no indication in the transcripts of the Diet or in eyewitness accounts that he ever said this, and most scholars now doubt these words were spoken.”¹

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diet_of_Worms

Ugh, seriously. There was fake news even back then? I traveled ten hours round trip, alone, to see the spot where Luther declared, “Here I stand, I can do no other” and now, some twenty-five years later, I’m learning that there’s no proof that he actually said that. Honestly.

But, if I hadn’t been so enamored with the statement at the time I probably wouldn’t have gone to Worms alone in the first place and if I hadn’t gone to Worms alone in the first, I wouldn’t be able to tell you this story about the way in which God answered my prayers and provided in unexpected ways while I was alone in Worms.

Back to the train station in Luxembourg City on that cool, crisp early December morning twenty-five years ago. I boarded the train for Worms with some snacks and a book I was reading for a history class—Darkness at Noon about Stalin’s Soviet Union and the corruption, deceit, and distress of living under that regime. It was a five hour train ride, a great time to get some reading done for class. For the first few hours I read diligently but the book Darkness at Noon is really, really dark and distressing and so I took a break and turned to the Worms section of Rick Steve’s Germany travel book. The section was smaller than I had anticipated. I read

things that began to make me feel a little uneasy—“because it is not an urban center not many people speak English.” Uhhh, I didn’t speak any German. And then, when I looked for attractions in Worms in the book, there was nothing about a location for the site of the Diet of Worms. But, up until then, everything had worked out on my travels and I figured they would in Worms, too.

I arrived in Worms mid-afternoon. When I exited the train station I began searching for signs directing me towards the site of Luther’s Diet. But, I couldn’t find any. Knowing it wasn’t that large of a city, I figured that if I just began wandering around, I would come across something to guide my way. As I neared the city center, I was delighted by the myriad craft booths set up for the “Christkind(e)l(s)(i)markt”, a German Christmas market that is a festival of sights, sounds, and sweet aromas of the season. I stopped and looked at a few of the items for sale, bought a snack, and then continued on my way. I kept walking and walking, the streets weren’t in a square grid, which, if you grew up in Northwest Ohio, is how streets should be, and the more I walked, the more lost I felt. I had been wandering for a couple of hours when I noticed the sun was beginning to set. At this point I didn’t even know where the train station was anymore. Somehow I made it back to the “Christkind(e)l(s)(i)markt” but instead of delighting in the sites,

sounds, and sweet aromas of the market I found them dizzying and blaring and nauseating and they mingled with the anxiety that was now threatening to overwhelm me.

Suddenly, Luther and his Diet of Worms faded to the background and I needed to find my way back to the train station so that I wouldn't miss the final train out of town that would take me to Luxembourg City where I would get on the bus to Sandweiler and return to the safety of my home away from home there.

As I made my way through the dizzying market I came across a little park. I was relieved to see a bench and went to sit down while I collected my thoughts. I began to pray for some help. Someway to get back to the train station, dear God. Find a way to lead me back, God. Please. My focus on my prayer was interrupted by a small group that was approaching. I realized that they were speaking English. Oh, holy moley, thank you, Jesus. I began eavesdropping a little more and they were speaking American English with southern accents. Thank you, Jesus! I was relying on every stereotype of Southern hospitality I knew when I garnered the courage to approach them. There was a man who seemed to be functioning as the group's leader. I asked him if he knew where the train station was.

Now, how the details spin out from here are a little jumbled in my mind but here's what I do know for sure. 1. The man I had approached was a church history professor on sabbatical from a college in Texas. 2. When I learned this information I told him why I was in Worms and that I couldn't find anything about Luther. 3. At that point he gestured upward and I discovered that we were standing under a large statue of Martin Luther. 4. The reason there was so little signage about Luther is that Worms was a hotspot in the Counter Reformation and it was now largely a Catholic area not prone to celebrating that part of its history. 5. He was a Seventh Day Adventist, a group I had, up until that point, just sort of poo-pooed in my mind. 6. His group led me safely back to the train station after offering to take me out for dinner with them, an invitation I had to decline so that I wouldn't miss my train. And friends, that's how God works. When we are lost and alone. When we literally cannot find our own way back. When the shadows lengthen and we find ourselves out in the cold . . . God sends angels—sometimes in the form of people we had previously poo-pooed—God sends angels to rescue us and show us the way home. This story about my search for Martin Luther in Worms has returned to me time and time again this week because Martin Luther was a person well-acquainted with difficult times and struggles. The Diet of Worms ended in the Edict of Worms that issued forth from the most powerful people in the region, “we forbid anyone from

this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, sustain, or favour the said Martin Luther.” Basically, the edict sought to put a strangle hold on Luther’s ministry by forbidding anyone from supporting him. But, he found support and love and care from courageous brothers and sisters in Christ. And, as we know now, he sparked a reformation that changed the world.

Luther would go on to serve as teacher, pastor, and spiritual companion to many. However, it was his actions and words during a time of plague that might be of most interest to us this morning. Plagues were far more common in that time. When asked to issue forth a word when the people of Wittenberg found themselves in a time of plague, a time when people wondered if they should flee the city for safer places or shelter in place, Luther had the following to say . . . “I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me however I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely as stated

above. See this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.”

Friends, most of us are called to do that part in the middle “I shall avoid places and persons wherever my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others.” Well, at least most of us are called to do that. Our mantra for this pandemic can be “Here I Sit.” But there are those among us who are called to “fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it . . . If my neighbor needs me . . . I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely . . .” This is the calling of the folks on the front line of this battle. Most of us serve the cause by staying home. Others, others are called to go out there and fight the good fight with all they’ve got. Indeed, right now as we’re spending this time together, our own Chris Murdoch is at the front line at Munson Medical Center helping to organize patients as they enter the hospital. Bridgette Walter, who used to be our Nursery Coordinator, is working at Munson doing her part to help. Kelly Devol is working there, too, continuing to care for the least among us. David Gordon is strategizing to help the hospital meet the needs of the community. These are just the ones I know about. There are so many who are living into their faith and risking their own health in order to love their neighbor as they love themselves. And

while they're out there, we're invited to stay where we are and use the time that has been given to pray without ceasing.

Friends, this is getting harder, not easier. The numbers and messages are changing every day. But, what is unchanging is God's presence, guidance, and love in the midst of it all.

Hear now the words of Psalm 118:1-71, 14-14

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;

his love endures forever.

2 Let Israel say:

“His love endures forever.”

3 Let the house of Aaron say:

“His love endures forever.”

4 Let those who fear the Lord say:

“His love endures forever.”

5 When hard pressed, I cried to the Lord;

he brought me into a spacious place.

6 The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid.

What can mere mortals do to me?

7 The Lord is with me; he is my helper.

13 I was pushed back and about to fall,

but the Lord helped me.

14 The Lord is my strength and my defense[a];

he has become my salvation.