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This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!

Romans 1:16-17 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes....For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

Lord our God, as today we rejoice in that which you carried out through your servant Martin Luther, the Reformation of the church, the unveiling of your powerful gospel which had long been obscured, work in us mightily through that gospel message so that we with faith unshaken believe it, and boldly sound forth to others this your power to save. Lord God, sanctify us by your truth; your word is truth! Amen.

Dear friends who share the Reformation heritage--Jesus Christ, and him crucified for us:

Rats--they were everywhere. "Rats--they fought the dogs and killed the cats. They bit the babies in the cradles and ate the cheese out of the vats, and licked the soup from the cooks' own ladles."

The tale continues with the city council of Hamelin meeting in desperation, trying to come up with some solution to the problem, when there intruded the strangest fellow, carrying a pipe. After introducing himself as the Pied Piper, he asked the counsel, "If I can rid your town of rats, will you give me a thousand guilders?"

They agreed, and then watched as the Piper walked out into the street, putting the pipe to his lips. "And 'er three shrill notes the pipe uttered, you heard as if an army muttered. And the murmuring grew to a grumbling, and the grumbling grew to a mighty rumbling, and out of the houses the rats came tumbling. From every which way rats came streaming; so many rats it looked like dreaming." With the notes of his pipe, the piper led the rats to the river's edge, where they all plunged in and perished.

The jubilation of the town of Hamelin was soon interrupted by the piper's request for the thousand guilders he had been promised. But the greedy council refused to pay their debt to him. "Once more he stepped into the street. To his lips again he laid his long pipe of smooth straight cane. And 'er he blew three notes--such sweet soft notes as yet musicians' cunning never gave the enraptured air-- out came the children running: all the little boys and girls with rosy cheeks and flaxen curls and sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls, tripping and skipping ran merrily after the wonderful music with shouting and laughter....When lo as they reached the mountain side, a wondrous portal opened wide, as if a cavern was suddenly hollowed. And the piper advanced and the children followed. And when all were in to the very last, the door in the mountainside shut fast."

What power in those sweet soft notes the piper sounded! But today we hear a sweeter sound, a more powerful sound: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." What Power--The Gospel!

Elsewhere in Germany, in Wittenberg, in the year 1508 a stranger came to town.

But this is no tale. His name was Martin Luther. He had come to Wittenberg to ready himself to teach the Bible at the new university there. As he studied the Scriptures, this soul-sick, sin-stricken, guilt-ridden young man learned a tune that he had not heard before, a tune that had been drowned out by the countless errors and abuses that had crept into the church of his day, the Roman Catholic Church. Luther learned the tune of the gospel, God's full and free forgiveness for sinners in Christ. Not without great resistance and many threats from Rome, Luther began piping those soft sweet notes. People heard that powerful gospel and followed. And they in turn proclaimed it to others, so that still today, we are following and we are piping that gospel sound, not because it's Luther's message, but because it's God's message, his power for salvation.

You know we're kind of a strange, seemingly helpless little band, aren't we? Our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is comparatively small. Our congregation is smaller. We often feel like a stranger in town, don't we? Others look down their noses at us and say, "What can they do, that church over there? Where's their power?" Might we be tempted to be ashamed? Others laugh at us and make fun of our message, saying it's silly and outdated; it's impotent and ineffective. Might we be tempted to blush, crawl back into a corner, and remain silent? But we have the gospel, the powerful message, the only message that can save sinners. What power--the gospel!

"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." The gospel is God's power to save.

What power God has! He created the universe, the world, and all that is in it in six days. But not only does God have power to create. When his creatures rebel against him in sin, God's justice requires that he use his power to destroy. God has power to destroy the world in a flood. God has power to rain fire and brimstone down on Sodom and Gomorrah. God has power to strike Egypt with plagues, to kill their firstborn, and drown their army in the depths of the sea. God has power to make the earth open up and swallow a rebellious Korah, Dathan and Abiram and all that belonged to them.

But our verse speaks of a greater power of God--power, not to destroy, but power to save. God's greatest power is demonstrated not in destruction, but in salvation; not in judgment, but in grace and mercy; not in law, but in gospel. It takes power to destroy, but it takes far greater power to save wretched sinners like you and me. The gospel is the power of God for salvation.

This gospel power sounds forth softly and sweetly, from Genesis 3's first promise of the seed of the woman to Revelation 22's final "Amen. Come Lord Jesus." This is the power of God's covenant with an old childless Abraham: "Through your offspring, all peoples on earth will be blessed." This is the power of the still small voice that encouraged a depressed Elijah when he feared God's covenant promise of salvation might fail. This is the power by which God gives unrighteous sinners like us his own righteousness, as Jeremiah's prophecy declares: "This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness." This is the power of God to save: "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Once a stranger intruded into our world. He had power -- power to still storms, power to heal the sick, power to feed 5000, power to raise the dead. Indeed he had the power of God himself, whom his miracles proved him to be.

But in him was a greater power; a conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried kind of power -- power veiled in apparent weakness -- Power as he was laid in a manger for his first bed,

becoming poor so that we through his poverty might become rich. Power as he was baptized by John in the Jordan; as he struggled against the devil's temptations, being tempted in every way, just as we are, only he was without sin. In him we see a greater power as he grew tired, hungry, weary from this life's difficulties and hardships, as he endured our poor lowly existence in this, our world of sin. We see a greater power as he humbly knelt down and washed his disciples' feet, showing them that the Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many, and as the next day his own hands and feet were nailed to a cross to suffer the punishment for our sins. This is the gospel--the power of God to save!

"For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed." Only the righteous can stand before God. Sinners must be destroyed, condemned, damned by a righteous God. But in the gospel God gives us righteousness, righteousness from himself, the righteousness of his own Son who lived our life for us, died our death and suffered our hell for us, making us righteous in God's sight and heirs of heaven. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." II Corinthians 5:21 tells us. Indeed he is The LORD Our Righteousness. What power--the gospel!

You know that most people and most churches have a terrible time trying to figure out this Jesus. That's not surprising. The people of Jesus' own day couldn't figure him out. They enjoyed watching his miracles and they even wanted to make him their king. But when Jesus refused to be a glorious earthly king, and insisted upon being humble and lowly, they turned against him. They couldn't understand that Jesus had come to save sinners, and that is a most humble and lowly task. So today, those who proclaim a mere social gospel, and look to Jesus as some kind of an earthly leader, or those who look to Jesus merely as a good example--"he shows us how to live"--with that viewpoint they will never figure Jesus out. As far as they're concerned, Jesus was the worst failure there ever was. Something went wrong. The poor guy became a victim of his own cause. The cross remains foolishness and a stumbling block to those who are perishing because they don't understand the gospel, the power of God for salvation. Nothing went wrong on that cross, as the empty tomb three days later proves. That cross is God's power to save. Jesus did not come to show us how. He came to do it for us!

Though Thomas at first doubted and did not understand, he was on the right track when he looked for nail wounds in God's hands and then declared "My Lord, and my God!" This gospel of Christ crucified alone makes us right with God. It is the only power for sinners to be saved. "The gospel...is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes....For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: `The righteous will live by faith.'"

Righteousness--we must be righteous to stand before God. Even those who don't have the gospel know this. Their conscience tells them. But ignorant of God's righteousness, the only righteousness of which people can think is a righteousness of their own. "I live a good life and try my hardest to do what I should." But that only condemns a person to hell because God declares, "Be perfect as I the Lord your God am perfect." As he looks at sinful mankind he says, "There is no one righteous, not even one....All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." [Romans 3:10,12] Indeed all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags!

Can't we understand then why Luther was so troubled before he learned the gospel? He knew he was not acceptable to God, knew he was condemned. But then he learned about that precious righteousness from God. Jesus has given us his

righteousness, and it is ours by faith. We don't earn righteousness, can't earn righteousness in any way. It's God's free gift to us. How precious! How simple! Alas, it seems too simple for too many who proceed to add to it something of their own doing, only to make themselves unacceptable to God. Jesus' righteousness alone avails before God.

It was the happiest day in Luther's life when he discovered this gospel, when he first heard the sweet, lilting tune of this righteousness from God in Christ. He says that it was like opening Paradise to him, that he at once ran through the Scripture with ecstasy, seeing everywhere how this righteousness opened salvation and heaven to him. Thank God that through his servant Luther, this joy is ours today.

"I am not ashamed of the Gospel," the apostle Paul told the Christians at Rome. Paul had once been ashamed of the gospel; in his self-righteousness he had persecuted Christ's church with all his might. But on the way to Damascus one day he ran head-on into one mightier than himself, was left lying on the ground, blinded by a light from heaven, the voice of the Savior ringing in his ears, and a greater power enlightening his heart, by which he later said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel." Now Paul would soon go to Rome, the powerful, glorious, magnificent capital of the world. Paul would go there a lowly prisoner in chains. Yet equipped with the gospel, how Paul towers above Rome. There he would sound, and there he would finally die while sounding that soft, sweet message of power.

"I am not ashamed of the gospel." In 1521, at a meeting in the town of Worms, where Luther was more or less put on trial for his faith and commanded to say that his teachings were wrong, Luther boldly declared, "Unless you can prove from the Bible that I have made wrong statements, I cannot and I will not take back anything. My conscience is bound by the Word of God. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me."

"I am not ashamed of the gospel." What about us? Don't those words demand that each of us ask, "What do I think of the gospel?" In all the universe there is no other power that can save as much as a single soul. "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." This is the power that gives me heaven. This is the only power that can give heaven to others.

In the tale of the Pied Piper, one lame boy lagged behind and was unable to reach the cavern in the hillside before it closed up. But he did get close enough to see the wonders inside, the marvelous joys and bliss that awaited the children. The tune of the gospel leads us and all who follow it to the bliss of heaven. Here is a tune worth piping, loudly and clearly, that through its sweet melody many can, like the Apostle Paul, like Martin Luther, and like you and me today, be led to an open Paradise.

Amen.

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.