Last week, I talked about learning to love the bomb, about seeking the face of God in the darkness that blinds us and the suffering that pains us, about learning to love the things we most wish had not or did not happen. The holiday we celebrate today is a prime example of that very thing. As we recall Reformation Sunday, we not only celebrate the renewal of Christ’s Church that came out of the persistent proclamation from a new generation of the Church’s leaders, we also solemnly remember the insults and anathemas hurled back and forth in the name of God, the excommunications and broken relationships, and the burnings at the stake and the wars that followed. It is a chapter of the Church’s history that we to love because it has made us who we are as a people of God, in spite of being so terrible that we should all wish it had never happened.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrestles with understanding and explaining something very similar. When the Messiah lived and taught among us, he was rejected by the very people to whom he was sent: God’s chosen people, Israel. It would appear that they had broken once and for all their covenant with God. And yet, Paul points out, it is that very rejection that opened the way for the gospel to spread to so many others. Their disobedience, he writes, has been the occasion for our experience of God’s mercy. God chose Israel to be God’s “royal priesthood,” the people who would bring God’s good news to the world; it seems that, even in their apparent disobedience, they have done just that.

So here’s the question: did God plan it this way? Did God “harden their hearts,” so to speak, so that Israel would reject Jesus and the Gentiles would be welcomed in? I hardly think so. I do think that God isn’t stupid, though, that God knows how humans react to the new ways that God presents the gospel to the world because it’s how we’ve always reacted; from the garden to the ark to the wilderness to the cross and beyond. And I think that God is creative enough, clever enough, and, most of all, loving enough, to take even outright rejection and turn it for God’s own purposes.

This divine repurposing is what theologians call “redemption.” Because God is God, there is nothing God cannot redeem: not human sinfulness, not death, not even pure evil. Like a Judo master, God can take all the forces turned against God and redirect them so that they can work for God’s purposes.

On this Reformation Sunday, as I read these words of Paul and of Jesus, and as I think about this moment in history in which we find ourselves, this is where my mind goes. For decades now, people have been talking about the decline of religion and the death of Christianity. Several theologians think that we are due for another Reformation, another turning point for the Church which will bring about a new understanding of God. I wonder if both viewpoints are correct; if this new thing that God is about to do is not so much a Reformation as it is a death and a resurrection.

Consider what Christianity might look like if it had never split from Judaism. Maybe it would still be a relatively small world religion, tied almost exclusively to a particular ethnic group. It may never have expanded much beyond the Jewish people. It would certainly have a different flavor; the Christian experience of God would probably still be tied to some form of observance of the law of Moses, with practices like circumcision or keeping kosher. That’s not to say that would be bad, but it would certainly be a different way of understanding God that we have now. The death that occurred when Jewish-Christian unity was lost has certainly given rise to all manner of violence and hostility over the last 20 centuries, including some of our most horrendous atrocities; but it has also opened our eyes to a new way of experiencing God. Not a better way, and not a more correct way, but a new way. Along with great evil, new life also sprouted. Now, Judaism and Christianity together offer a more nuanced and multi-faceted view of God, and our world is better for it. Both the harm and the wholeness exist side by side.

Christianity may be due for another Reformation, but maybe a Reformation would only really bring renewal for those who already claim the label of “Christian,” those who belong to an “organized religion.” Perhaps what God has in mind is not a Reformation, but a new birth, the breathing into existence of something we have not yet conceived, something that is not a “religion” at all, but which can bear the good news to new people who could not or would not otherwise receive it.

Speaking for myself, I would be very excited to be a part of a “new thing” like this. I would be grateful to be a part of sharing the good news of God’s work to save and redeem creation with a whole new group of “Gentiles” who have no connection to or desire for the trappings of “organized religion.”

But I’d be lying if I said I would not also miss those same trappings: the liturgy, the hymns, the holidays and traditions—these have been my home for so long. It is the community shaped by these things that has been my refuge and strength through joy and sorrow, that has guided me in my transition from childhood to adulthood, that has been my touchstone through all the changes and uncertainties of life. I am afraid to set out on a new path, to grieve what I would be leaving behind. I think I am not the only one who feels this way.

Following Jesus challenges us to not only allow ourselves to be reformed but resurrected. When we only see God in the pleasant, the comfortable, the familiar, *those* things become our refuge and strength; they become the things to which we turn for help in time of trouble. But the Psalmist doesn’t say “the synagogue is my refuge and my strength,” not “the Lutheran tradition is my refuge and strength,” not “my religion or my faith is my refuge and strength;” they say “*God* is my refuge and strength; *God* is my very present help in time of trouble.”

As long as we only see God in those beautiful things, we will remain enslaved to them, afraid of what exists outside of them. We will shun hardship and avoid pain, and we will cut ourselves off from the ways that God might be working in those things to bring new life beyond our imagining. We will continue to live in the houses we have built for God—the churches, the denominations, the religions—not realizing that these things are transient, and so we cannot abide there forever. Jesus, on the other hand, offers us a place where we can abide forever, a place in God’s presence.

The thing is, we don’t always recognize that place as the house of God. Sometimes it looks like schism and destruction, like doubt and despair. Sometimes it looks like being cast out of the synagogue or excommunicated from the Church. When it doesn’t match our image of God’s house, it can sometimes feel like the outer darkness, filled with weeping and gnashing of teeth. It takes the ability to trust that God is in that outer darkness with us, to hope that God can redeem anything—even suffering and death—to see that God is always creating us to be the people we are still becoming.

Children of God, this is not just true for you and me; it is not just true for the Church. It is true for all of creation, the entire world, and all that dwells therein. I know that this moment in history is filled with fear and uncertainty. The fate of the Church aside, there are many terrors that stalk the night: we fear COVID and climate change; we are worried about the outcome of the election and what it means for out nation and our world; we fear for the safety of refugees and mourn the separation of families at the border; we cry out until we are hoarse for justice for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the ever-growing list of Black and Brown lives lost to racism; we are sickened and scared by fact that the water of Flint is still poisonous and by to the decades-long housing crisis right here in our own backyard; we live under the dread of sudden and random gun violence.

This old world of ours, Children of God, sometimes seems to be on its last legs, raging, raging against the dying of the light. How often I find myself wondering how we can possibly survive much longer with things going in the direction they are. My only hope, Children of God, is in the unsearchable judgements and the inscrutable ways of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who hung on the cross and then walked out of the tomb, the God who has promised to redeem all things. I trust in God because I know, because I have seen that God walks in the darkness as well as in the light. I know that God is walking through this dark hour with us, Beloved, and as long as God walks with us, we have the love of God to carry us through, the love of God that created the world and even now is at work to redeem it, to turn it back from destruction and toward new life. God’s love has the power to create the people and the world that we are becoming out of who we are now, out of this mess of despair and destruction that surrounds us.

So don’t lose hope, Beloved. Some things are dying now, it’s true; but death is a part of life, for better or worse, and the source of all life is God. I believe that the death we see now will be the next occasion for God to show us mercy, and that in that mercy, God is setting us free to be who we are becoming, a people stronger, a people kinder, a people more humble and more careful for what are now experiencing. The road is not easy or peaceful or good, but the powerful and creating love of God will see us safely through to the next leg of our journey. When we eventually look back on these days, we will wish they had never happened; but we will also be able to look with love on the people that God will have formed us to be through them. All things come from God, and all things exist through God, and all things belong to God, so we can praise the glory of God who is making all things new.