

May the words of my mouth and the mediations of my heart be acceptable to you oh God, my strength and my joy... Amen

Scripture is full of some strange and outdated words that we don't often use in daily speaking. One such word I can think of is tabernacle.

Outside of seminary, I don't know the last time I had read, discussed, or thought of that word.

For those of you digging around in your brain for the definition of tabernacle, you don't have too far to look. Simply open the Bible to Exodus chapters 25—31 and 35—40. In these chapters you will either be fascinated, or bored by all the details of the tabernacle.

For example, you will find the specific measurements needed to build it, the specific colors of fabric, the different building materials, the purposes of the rooms and who can enter and when. For example, the most sacred room was the Holy of Holies where only the high priest could enter once a year.

As the tabernacle was the tent where God dwelled among the Israelites as they wandered the wilderness for 40 years.

Fast forward many centuries later, specifically to the gospel reading from today.

Here we find Jesus and his disciples at a festival.

A festival that celebrates the autumn harvest and God's dwelling presence among them. In particular the festival celebrates God's dwelling presence with the Israelites during the 40 years they wandered the wilderness.

And to celebrate this festival, people would build temporary booths or tabernacles where they would dwell during the weeklong festival.

Giving the festival its namesake, as it is called the Festival of Booths, the Feast of the Tabernacles, or Sukkot. As Sukkot is the Hebrew word for tabernacle.

I invite you to picture yourself here during Jesus' time. You are in the crowded streets, bursting with temporary tabernacles. Where joy fills the air as people celebrate the harvest, God's provision, and God's dwelling presence.

Where Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

The kind of freedom that is only birthed from being in relationship with Christ.

Relationship that is only made possible through dwelling in God's Word and in God's presence.

As it is only through God's dwelling presence that we are set free.

And what a better day than today, as we celebrate reformation, to dwell in the transforming presence of God.

As reformation commemorates the day when Martin Luther went to Castle Church in Wittenberg Germany to post his 95 theses.

Not because Martin Luther wanted to divide the church, but because he wanted to reform the church.

Reform that was needed because the church had strayed in different ways from the word of God.

However, reformation does not always need to be some grand movement that reforms the world as we know it.

Reformation can take place inside of you, inside churches, and in communities.

And as I have gotten to know all of you, I have learned just how much you have been through in the past few years.

You have wandered together through a pandemic, you have wondered together through a pastor retiring, you have endured the deaths of dear loved ones.

And I can only imagine that these past few years, at times, might have seemed like you were wandering around the wilderness.

So maybe this year, reformation at St. John means to continue in God's word together. Because maybe this year, God is calling you back together. To continue to be in community. And welcoming those of you who are newer, like me, into this community.

As reformation will look differently for each of you.

And the only way to discover what that is, is to open your hearts to dwell with God. To listen deeply to what the Spirit is stirring up.

Perhaps the Spirit is encouraging you to try out something new on the time and talent sheet. Or nudging you to stay for a cup of coffee during coffee hour.

Maybe the Spirit is encouraging you to share an idea of outreach, to help out in a different way, or to call a parishioner you miss.

And maybe reformation is calling you to return to this practice of dwelling with God as often as you can, not as you can't. Meaning don't "should" on yourself, be gentle and experience this time as it is.

As wandering takes time. And we are all in this together.

Because together we take the steps to dwell with God. Dwelling together throughout worship, in song and in prayer. In outreach, and in community.

As God has been showing God's dwelling presence with us since the beginning.

Which is why I shared the snapshots of our history today.

I shared how the Israelites dwelled with God in the wilderness. Jesus at the feast of the tabernacle. And the start of the reformation movement.

As all of these events embody God's active presence with us and portray the different ways God dwells with us.

And even though God is always present and yearning to dwell with us.

It is only when we acknowledge that, and continue in God's word, that we can experience this radical indwelling.

As reformation does not happen on our own.

It only happens through God. As God's dwelling presence is what sets us free.

And this presence is so vast and everlasting, some might even call it a mighty fortress. As nothing can separate you from God's love and the transformation that is made possible in Christ... Amen.