

## Reformation 2020

*“Be still then, and know that I am God;  
I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth.”*

--Psalm 46:10

In just a few short months, God has taken over the internet. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, churches around the world had to suspend their face-to-face services of worship, learning, witness, community-building, therapy groups, administration, finance, doctrinal deliberations, etc. As we learned to conduct our faith on-line, millions more websites, facebook pages, YouTube Channels, internet start-up companies, preaching missions, faith-based counseling services, small group support meetings sprouted up as though from nothing. And the churches insisted very early that even when in-person gathering for any of these became possible again, the on-line option would continue. Now it is possible to encounter the Gospel, join a worship service, become engaged in Bible study, seek pastoral care, meet other Christians, from any cell phone, tablet, computer, almost everywhere in the world.

As the mighty Holy Spirit of God continues to unfold Reformation 2020, let us remember the lesson from Reformation 1517. The upheaval in society, commerce, government, the international order, family life and the environment that are part of Reformation 2020 all have parallels in Reformation 1520: those reformations have influenced human history for over 500 years, so what we do now we may be doing for a long time! But these realities, as life-and world-changing as they are, are not the centre of Reformation 2020 just as they were not the centre of Reformation 1517. The late Rev. Dr. Helmut Thielicke perhaps has articulated the central matter as well as anyone. Out of the depths of WWII, he rephrased the central question of Reformation 1517 so we could hear it anew in Reformation 2020:

“It is hard to think of Luther’s question, “How can I find a gracious God?” as being uttered by a contemporary voice...If we were to try to find a modern equivalent it would probably be the question: “Where is God?”....We feel so understood in this question...for the very reason that it remains open and pressing...Although there is a sense of distress in Luther’s question too, it has a very different character...Luther’s question is not a monologue of [seekers] but an answer in a dialogue. The first word in this dialogue is God’s question, “Adam...where art thou?”...it is the question by which we are arrested and must suddenly stand still and look God in the eyes.” (*Out of the Depths*, 1962, p. 51-53).

Thielicke saw very clearly from the depths in the middle of this century of upheaval from the Great War and the Spanish Flu pandemic and extending through the wars and upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> that God is seeking us in judgment and grace. These are acts of God by which all humanity is “thus forced—at long last forced—to take God seriously.” When that happens—when we are forced into Psalm 46 verse 10—we are confronted with the option of belonging to our selves or belonging to our God. Has not the public health plea made it clear that we must give up belonging only to our self if we are to get through this pandemic without widespread infection and death? But secular modernity can not provide the desire to do so: that comes only by “looking God in the eyes” and realizing that “what we are trying to hide in our hands behind our backs” God already sees—and sees also the things that “are not in our hands that should be” because God gave them to us and we have lost them or squandered them (p. 53). For only then can the second word in the dialogue be spoken, the word of

God's peace through Jesus Christ. "The peace of God...consist[s]..in the truth that in spite of everything God seeks us and that we may live in the power of [God's] forgiveness" (p. 57).

As many of us commemorate Reformation Sunday on-line this year, may we not find just another reflection of our secular self wrapped in religious comfort, but rather be confronted with the question that reforms us, our age, and our world: "How can I have fellowship with God in spite of all that there is between us?" –this God, "who does not pretend to be a merely friendly God; but...wants to be the forgiving Father...At the point where this takes place...there is the cross; there are the blood and tears of God...for God loves us in truth, and in this truth is the abyss..."(p. 58).

"Our Father, grant us a harmonious love so that we may all accept each other as true brothers and sisters and turn to you as the dear Father of us all, not seeking only our own advantage in prayer before you, but let us strip ourselves of all hatred, envy and discord, and love each other as true and reverent children of God *as our Father.*" Amen (Adapted from Martin Luther, *Personal Prayer Book*, Luther's Works Volume 43, p 30).