Joshua 24:14-15 Joshua said, “Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve him wholeheartedly and faithfully. Remove the gods that your fathers served in the region across the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15But if you see no benefit in serving the Lord, then choose for yourselves today whomever you will serve—whether the gods that your fathers served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household—we will serve the Lord!”

So here it is Reformation. I like the festival of Reformation. The history and the drama of all that happened is absolutely fascinating. More than that, the historical impact of the Reformation on the world is pretty well documented. One of the most complete books on Luther and the Reformation is by E. G. Schwiebert. In his book the man covers Luther, the political scene and its actors, and all the historical nuances that fell into place to allow this reformation of the church to take place. And yes, at the heart of it all was a German monk by the name of Martin Luther.

Luther was born in 1483 in the land of Germany. And all we really need to know is that eventually this Luther fellow became an Augustinian monk and then a Roman Catholic priest. But Luther had a problem. His problem was the issue of sin and what to do with it. He knew he was a sinner through and through. He knew he could not do anything to atone for or to appease the Lord God when it came to his sins. Luther was also very frustrated because his Catholic church did not teach a gracious God but rather a harsh, angry and “you will be damned” kind of God. And when it came to appeasing that God and his anger, the Catholic Church didn’t direct you to Jesus but rather to the Pope and the Catholic priesthood as the ones having the answers. The problem is that Luther found the answers of the Catholic Church rather incomplete and wanting. Remember, he is a Catholic priest. So Luther does what a few people encourage him to do, Luther starts studying the Scripture.

Eventually, what Luther finds is that the Scripture and the Catholic Church don’t agree. The Catholics tell you to look to the Pope and the priesthood, but the Scripture tells you to look to Jesus and his redemptive acts. The Catholics, especially at the time, were offering you forgiveness for money, something called an indulgence, which Luther found especially godless. And you could say that it was Luther’s reaction to indulgences that got him into deep water.

Because in a desire to debate this issue of indulgences, forgiveness bought for money, Luther posted his Ninety-five Thesis. That was done on October 31st, 1517. Luther just wanted someone to debate him, to help him understand and grasp this buying and selling of forgiveness of sins. And honestly, if you read the thesis, you will discover that initially Luther didn’t even think the Pope knew anything about this selling of indulgences. All that was going to change very soon.

Do you know what worked to bring Luther to the forefront more than anything? The printing press, more specifically the moveable type printing press. Back in the mid 1400’s a fellow by the name of John Gutenberg refined and made very practical the whole business of printing and disseminating information. Because of that, within weeks of Luther’s posting of the thesis, these thesis had been copied, printed and distributed throughout most of Germany. Now add some very astute rulers who saw the potential in the firestorm that Luther created and you have a Reformation.

To me, the pinnacle of the Reformation is the Diet of Worms. Yes, an actual trial of Luther in Worms, Germany. But not really a trial. The judges didn’t want to discuss Luther’s teachings or even debate any of the books and tracts that Luther had written in the past 4 years since the thesis. They just called upon Luther to recant. To take it all back and stop teaching what he was teaching. It is at this trial that Luther made that most famous statement, a statement that I say still stands for every true Lutheran or Lutheran Church: *“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. Amen.”*

You might appreciate those words all the more when you understand that Luther was being threatened by the Pope and Emperor with becoming an “outlaw.” What that meant is that anyone who wanted could kill Luther and be rewarded. Despite death hanging over his head, Luther stood firm in what the Word of God taught. And thus was born the Lutheran Reformation.

As we contemplate this event of history, I thought the words of Joshua were very appropriate for today. Let’s contemplate what they say to us under the theme: **SERVE THE LORD.**

You need to understand that this section of Joshua is from the end of Joshua’s life. Joshua has been informed that he is about to die. So Joshua summons all the people, their leaders and elders before the Tabernacle of God. It is clear that Joshua is concerned for the spiritual well-being of his people. They have conquered the Land of Canaan. They have established homes and settled down in peace. So Joshua challenges them, challenges them with deciding what they will do and be. The challenge is rather simple: Will you continue to serve the Lord your God, the Lord who has blessed you, given you victory and who showers his goodness upon you in so many ways or will you choose to turn away from God, to chase after the false gods of Egypt or the false gods of the Amorites and Canaanites? The challenge is clear. The challenge is heartfelt. And if you would, the challenge is still good for us to contemplate and think about in our lives.

Which will you choose? Not long ago I had the opportunity to remind a fellow believer that in reality there were only two religions in this world of ours. That’s right, just two religions, but unfortunately those two religions are divided into many denominations and practices. The two religions are: The religion of work-righteousness and the religion of salvation by grace through faith alone. That’s it. Either you believe you are going to live right, be right, do right and be so awesome and good that God or whoever you worship, is going to be so happy with you and what you have done that he just has to let you into his eternal kingdom. That’s work-righteousness. That what you do, how you do it, when and where and on and on that’s what gets you heaven or whatever you want the afterlife to be.

The other religion is salvation by grace through faith alone. That God has done everything. That God has sent a Savior to atone for your sins and on the basis of what that Savior has done you receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Your faith is totally dependent upon the Lord your God and His Son Jesus Christ. You are going to be in heaven with God forever because Jesus died, rose and ascended into heaven. You get this gift of God because you believe and trust in God. And God, through his Holy Spirit, grants you this gift of faith in Jesus and thus eternal life and salvation. You can choose to reject this gift of faith or you can stay in this faith that God has given constantly strengthened by the Gospel in Word and sacrament for your eternal good.

Whom will you serve? That’s the challenge. To serve the Lord God and his Son Jesus, our Lord and Savior from sin or to reject this God and his offer of eternal life? Whom will you serve?

Yet, I do think we have to dig a bit deeper. As Lutheran’s we grasp and understand that our faith and its salvation is clearly based on God’s Word. Even Luther challenged: prove me wrong by the Bible! Can you claim to serve the true God if you clip and snip, tear and amend what the Bible says? I don’t think you can. And again, you have heard me say many times, the Bible is not some unclear, take it how you want it kind of book. It is clear, precise and accurate in all that it says and reveals. The Bible must be taken as a whole or not at all.

Just think it through. If I can determine that this part and that part is not true, then how can I be sure that any part is still true? Did you know we actually practice that idea in our lives? Look at what happened not long ago. A fast food restaurant was accused of not selling what it claimed it was selling and that fast food chain took a big financial hit. When you buy something and you don’t get 100% of what you were buying, we get upset and decide that said business is cheating and worthless. I don’t understand why we seem to have the opposite attitude toward God and His Word. Don’t you think God has and can clearly, precisely and without error reveal himself and all that we need for salvation? Or have we forgotten that solemn warning that God has given in 2 Timothy 4:3-4, **“For there will come a time when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, because they have itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teaching in line with their own desires. They will also turn their ears away from the truth and will turn aside to myths.”** That’s why they are so many different church bodies. Because people will not put up with sound doctrine. It is not the Word that is unclear but rather people who don’t want to grasp its clarity! Whom will you serve? The God who has revealed himself in the Bible or the people who don’t want to hear about it?

Notice that Luther was not willing to compromise even one truth of the Bible and neither should we. Shall we reject the truth of Creation because scientists claim it is wrong? Shall we decide that Jesus didn’t actually physically arise from the dead, but that all we are really supposed to do is keep him and his teachings in our heart? Shall we deny God his power and majesty in causing his will to be done and determine that it is all just a matter of fate? And seriously, why would you believe in some sort of ethereal idea of fate and yet reject the idea of a God who is working for our good and salvation? You would only do that if you have rejected God. Whom will we serve?

You know, I like to think of religion like a great big ladder. It’s a ladder that you need to climb and it is at least a 100 ft high. When it comes to my ladder, based on God’s Word it is solid, strong, and completely dependable and safe no matter what height you are at. But the false religious ladder has rungs missing. As you look, you can see that parts of the sides of the ladder are cracked and there are clearly some sections where the side of the ladder is actually broken and missing. That ladder sways and rocks and I can say is never ever safe to go up. Attempt to climb and you will find that you will fall or that ladder is going to break and fall. It is just not safe. Oh, and did I mention that the Christian ladder is such that you don’t really have to climb. As soon as you step on the very first rung and hold onto the sides the ladder acts like an escalator and begins to move you up slowly and safely till you are where you need to be. God will take care of it all and get you to Him just as He promised.

We talked last week about the enemy Satan. You realize that he is only one of the great enemies we face. As I said, Satan will do anything he can to destroy your soul. The other great enemies we have are the world and our sinful flesh.

The world, already in Satan’s back pocket, is not your friend. It will deceive and work to lure you from God. I look at some of the things I have seen in my life, things that we are told will help us and make our lives better and so on. But have you ever noticed how the various things of this world almost always end up serving and promoting evil? We have these awesome things called cell phones. Today my phone can do more and accomplish more than the first 5 computers that I owned. They are wonderful tools of learning, knowledge, and communication. Yet what are we learning? As people are relying more and more on their social media and electronic connections they are losing basic ideas and practices of interaction with others. Instead of dealing with others politely and with care and concern we just fire away, rant and rave and air out our opinions with complete callousness. That’s what we do on social media and that’s what we think we should do in person and it is destroying our way of life. Just do a search on the impact of cells phones and social media on society and brace yourself. Once again, something good is being turned into something bad by our world. The world is not your friend.

And our own sinful flesh? We so easily get swept up in the latest trends and ideas of life. God says no, but our flesh says yes and it is usually not God who wins that battle within us. We are growing up without self-control and personal discipline. In many cases our young people don’t know how to survive or even endure because we don’t help our kids learn to fight the good fight. We forget that if we don’t teach our children to do and be right, they will, of their sinful nature, go wrong. There is no doubt in my mind that we are our own worst enemies and sadly most of the time we don’t even grasp that truth.

Whom will you serve? I pray your answer is that of Joshua. **“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”** We will pursue God’s truth and wonder, bask in his grace and love, marvel in the Savior Jesus and keep in our hearts and minds the very hope, the sureness of eternal life and salvation in Jesus. Yes, let us serve the Lord. Let us be his light of wisdom and the imitation of his grace to the world. Let us with humble hearts hear and believe God’s precious Word, trusting our souls to Jesus and his victory. Yes, let us and our homes serve the Lord! That I would say is the idea of Reformation for us today. Serve the Lord! Amen.