Sunday, October 31, 1976
MARTIN LUTHER: A MAN IN SEARCH OF GOD
I Romans 5:1-5 (1, 10, 28, 62)

My name is Martin Luther! I was born on November 10, 1483, in Eisleben, Germany. I want to tell you about my search for God, for it was this search which caused me to be the kind of man I was.

My home and early school life were somewhat different than yours today. Very strict discipline was maintained at all times. All of the teaching in the school was punctuated by the rod. From little on, my parents had it all planned that I was to become a lawyer. Then they wanted me to make a prosperous marriage and support them in their old age.

This was their plan, but it didn't work out that way. You know how that it. Many of you have no doubt made plans or had ideas as to what your children should do and then found the outcome quite different from what you had planned and dreamed.

I did attend college and was on my way to becoming a lawyer, but things changed for me before I got my law degree. But before I tell you about my religious search, I must give you a little background on some of the prevalent religious beliefs in my time.

During the time in which I lived, people believed not only in God and Jesus Christ, but also in all kinds of demons and evil spirits. People believed that sinister spirits would release storms, floods and pestilence and would seduce persons to sin and melancholia. The spirit world was more real to us than the material world and indeed had complete control for good or for ill over the material world. For example, my mother believed that these spirits played such minor pranks as stealing eggs, milk, and butter. I was never completely free of such beliefs, so prevalent were they in my time.

In medieval Christianity, our beliefs and emphases were also somewhat different than yours today. Medieval Christianity produced all sorts of tensions within people by playing alternately upon fear and hope. I know this was true of me. Hell was stoked with fire, not because people lived in perpetual dread, but precisely because they did not; and hell was also used to drive people with fear to the sacraments of the church. If we were too petrified with terror, purgatory was then introduced by way of mitigation as an inter111ediate place where those not bad enough for hell nor good enough for heaven might make further repentance.

However, if this alleviation inspired complacency, the temperature was advanced on purgatory and then the pressure was again relaxed through indulgences. An indulgence was based on the theory that all of the saints and Christ himself were so good that they had goodness left over, merits in excess. These extra merits were in a storehouse or bank and could be drawn upon by those of us who were not good enough. However, the Pope was the head cashier at this bank of merits and only through his permission could we draw upon these extra merits of the saints. To obtain some of these extra merits was called an indulgence.

But even more disconcerting than the fluctuation of the temperature of the afterlife was the oscillation between the wrath and mercy of God and the divine hierarchy. God was portrayed now as the Father, and then as the wielder of the thunder. He might be softened by the intercession of his kindlier Son, who again was delineated as an im-placable judge unless mollified by his mother, Mary, who, being a woman, was not above cheating both God and the

devil on behalf of her followers; and if she were remote, one could enlist the aid of her mother, St. Anne!

In your time, I have noticed that some of the best sellers on the bookshelves are about how to escape the income tax, how to escape worry and tension; how to find peace of mind; how to win friends and influence people and more. In my time, the best sellers were on how to escape hell and the wrath of God. All sorts of books and manuals were sold that gave explicit instructions on the art of dying in order to be sure of someday reaching paradise. Your best sellers deal more with the art of living; the art of staying alive. Our main emphasis was on how to escape hell and its tortures and reach heaven, or how to reduce the number of years in purgatory.

Like most Christian in my day, I knew what to do about my plight. The church taught that no sensible person would wait until his deathbed to make an act of contrition and plead for grace. From beginning to end, the only secure course was to lay hold of every help the church had to offer: sacraments, pilgrimages, indulgences, the intercessions of the saints. And the most sure way to escape the torments of hell was to become a monk.

After all, this life is only a brief period of training for the life to come where the saved will enjoy an eternity of bliss and the damned will suffer everlasting torment. This is what we believed. The whole idea was that you had to work and work hard if you wanted to reach God and even then, God might not receive you. And the Church through the Pope and his hierarchy had the power to help or hinder you. I have given you this background for it leads up to my first religious crisis and decision in my search for God.

One sultry day in July 1505, when I was 21 years old, and a law student at the University of Erfurt, I had an unexpected encounter with death and what I knew was a call from God. As I was returning to school after a visit with my parents, sudden lightning struck me down. I knew then that I had to become a Monk. I had been summoned by a call from heaven. My decision was made! About two weeks were required for me to arrange my affairs and then I entered the Augustinian monastery. Here I thought I would certainly find God and be able to satisfy him as I had always felt I had to do.

During my first year in the monastery, my own inner tempest subsided. I was sure that I was finding and working my way to salvation at last. I worked hard to please God and was content to spend my days in prayer, in song, and in meditation and quiet companionship, in disciplined and moderate austerity.

(here walk toward the communion table)

However, soon another thunderstorm was to appear in my soul. The occasion of this was the celebration of my first mass as an Augustinian priest. This event was always an ordeal because the Mass is the focal point of the Church’s means of grace; at least so believed the church at that time. Here on the Altar, we believed, the bread and wine became the flesh and blood of Christ, and the sacrifice of Calvary is reenacted. Christ is actually sacrificed again. Thus, the priest who performs the miracle of transforming the elements enjoys a power and a privilege denied even to the angels. The whole difference between the clergy and the laity rested on this. So, you can imagine how a young priest, sensitive and afraid of God, might tremble to perform a rite in which God himself would appear in human form — I would be holding God in my hands, and I thought of God primarily as a wrathful God.

I shall never forget that experience. As I stood here at the altar and heard the introductory words of the mass and finally came to the words...WE OFFER THEE, THE LIVING, THE TRUE, THE ETERNAL GOD...at these words, I was utterly terrified and horror-stricken. I thought to myself, “with what tongue shall I address such majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine majesty? The angels surround him! At his nod the earth trembles! And shall I, miserable little pigmy, say I want this, or ask for that? For I am dust and ashes and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal, and true God!”

The terrors of the holy. the horrors of the Infinitude smote me like a new lightning bolt! Now you people living here in the more secularized 20th century may have difficulty imagining what I am talking about. You, who believe mostly in the powers of people! You who sometimes try to bring God too much down to your own level and make him nothing more than the man upstairs. You, who sometimes think you can manipulate God to your own ends. You seem to lack in your time a sense of the holiness, the awesomeness of God.

However, to me at that point in my life, I was seeking God and yet God was so holy, so inapproachable, that I was afraid of him. I knew that I was unworthy of approaching God. So, I was at the same time attracted and repelled by God. How could a man like me stand before Divine Majesty? How could a transgressor, a sinner, confront divine holiness?

After that terrifying experience of my first Mass, I somehow pulled myself together and went about my appointed duties. In the meantime, my superiors in the monastery had decided that I should become a professor and teacher in addition to my being a priest.

However, the problem of the alienation of man from God, of myself from God, still remained a major problem for me. Not only in the hour of death, but daily as a priest; I stood at the altar in the presence of God. How could man abide God’s holiness unless he himself were holy? Thus, I set myself in the pursuit of holiness so that I might rightfully approach God and find his forgiveness and peace.

Whatever good works a person might do to save himself, I was resolved to perform. I fasted, sometimes three days on end without a crumb. I laid upon myself vigils and prayers in excess of those stipulated by the rules of the monastery. I even beat myself with a whip to atone for my sins. Yet I still felt that I couldn’t reach up to God. I even went to Rome and sought every indulgence there was, but it was to no avail. Love God? I hated him!

About this time, I was transferred to the University at Wittenberg, Germany, where I became professor of Bible and also priest at the parish church. Since I had to prepare lectures on most of the books of the Bible for my regular teaching, I put myself seriously to the task of learning the meaning of scripture. These close studies of the Bible, especially Paul’s letter to the Romans, brought me to my third religious crisis, the one which helped solve my inner turmoil. I call it a crisis; however, it was in reality like a still small voice compared to my experience in the thunderstorm and my terror at my first Mass. And as in the case for many people, the solution to my religious problem, my greatest religious experience, came in the midst of the performance of my daily tasks of teaching, studying, and preaching. There was no. blinding light from heaven, no earth-shaking religious ceremony. But God spoke to me in a new and meaningful way, and it changed my life!

The more I studied the life, teachings, and death of Christ, the more I came to see that persons cannot reach God. It is impossible! But the good news is that God has come to us! Christ had

cried from the cross before dying — “MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?” What could be the meaning of this? Christ evidently felt himself forsaken by God, deserted! This is exactly what I had felt! Christ’s descent into hell was nothing more than this sense of separation, alienation from God. But why should Christ know such desperation? I knew why I had felt it. I was weak in the presence of God, impure in the presence of the Holy. But Christ was not weak or impure. The answer must be that Christ took to himself the iniquity of us all. He became so identified with us and with our sin that he participated in our very alienation from God.

This along with more study of the Bible, gave me a completely new view of God; although not really new to Christianity, for Paul and the other Apostles had known it, but it was new to me. Good news to me! God is not only a wrathful judge, but also a God of love, a God of acceptance, a God of action on behalf of those he loves. I had been all of my life trying to climb a ladder to God, never realizing that God had come to me and to all people!

How amazing that God in Christ should do all of this? That the highest, the most holy, should be the all-loving God too; that the ineffable Majesty should stoop to take upon himself our flesh, subject to hunger and cold, death and desperation. We see him lying in the feedbox of a donkey, laboring in a carpenter’s shop, dying a derelict under the sins of the world.

Heretofore, I had no confidence in God; I had thought that I could not even approach him; and I felt at times that I hated Him. However, now I knew that God had approached me; that he was seeking me out; even though I was a miserable sinner. I knew now what Paul meant when he wrote to the Romans — THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY THEIR FAITH!

It was this discovery of the center of Christianity which became the basis for everything else that I did in my life. It became the center from which my life was lived.

At the beginning, I did not have any idea of trying to radically reform the Roman Catholic Church, other than to get the church to emphasize the really Good News: to proclaim that God has come to us and accepted us; and we are saved by faith.

However, the more I continued in my duties as priest and professor, the more I saw the church of my day emphasizing that people could obtain God’s favor by buying indulgences and performing certain rituals. The church was also asserting that the Pope could release souls from purgatory and to me this was ridiculous. If he could do so, then he was cruel not to release them all, money or no money. Thus, I felt it my duty as priest to warn the people that buying indulgences would do them no good.

And then in the year 1517, a man named Tetzel came selling indulgences right close to my own parish boundaries. He was even promising people that as soon as their coins hit the basket, a soul was released from purgatory. Such nonsense and misleading of people finally caused me to explode.

Thus, on the eve of All Saint’s Day, what you today call Halloween, I nailed 95 theses or statements onto the church door at Wittenberg. In these theses, I attacked the whole theory of indulgences and asked that the entire idea and practice be publicly debated. I even attacked the Pope himself. What happened after that is history. Soon these statements of mine were printed and widely distributed. My ideas spread over Germany and into many surrounding countries. It was not my intention to split the church, or to break away from it in any way.

However, a few years later when the time came, I had no choice. I was put on trial and asked to recant and deny all of my writings and ideas, and to admit they were full of errors. I told the court that unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason — I do not accept the authority of Popes and Councils for they have contradicted each other — my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me!

This is really only the beginning of my story. There is so much more that I could tell you. But if you remember nothing else, remember this: I was found by God and I discovered him to be a God of justice but also a loving and forgiving God.

I found God to be a MIGHTY FORTRESS, A BULWARK WHICH NEVER FAILING.