

Isaiah 55:6-11

Presentation of the Augsburg Confession, June 25, 2017

Theme: The Word of God works!

INJ It was a Saturday afternoon in the town of Augsburg in Southern Germany. Everyone with any status was there. The Emperor sat in dignity. Rulers, princes, and representatives stood in anticipation. People overflowed the room into the courtyard. This was a moment to remember! The king and the church would put to rest those who challenged church teaching and practice. Everyone listened intently as Christian Beyer stood to read the statement of what the Lutherans believe. He read loudly and clearly, even though it took over two hours to read the German text. People standing outside heard every word. This was the setting as the Augsburg Confession was presented. The events that followed marked not the end of a disturbance, but the beginning of a new church. What happened on June 25, 1530 in Augsburg was not because of tireless effort by Martin Luther and many others. It was the result of God working through his Word.

This year we observe a milestone. It has been 500 years since Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses inviting and igniting debate over the sale of indulgences. Lutherans all over the world are marking the anniversary with Bible Studies, worship services, movies and books. The presentation of the Augsburg Confession doesn't have a round number anniversary this year (487), but we want to remember the bold stand the confessors made on God's Word. We review the history not to worship a person or to glorify a human document, but to praise our God. His undeserved love saves sinners! The inspired Word of the prophet Isaiah shows us that God's Word works. It works by calling the sinner to repentance and by proclaiming the grace of the Lord. It worked in history, and we can be confident that the Word of God still works today.

The last verses of our lesson may be familiar to some of you. God's Word does not return to him empty, but accomplishes his desire and achieves his purpose. Earlier in the lesson, Isaiah tells us what God wants to accomplish through his Word: "Seek the LORD while he can be found! Call on him while he is near! Let the wicked man abandon his way. Let an evil man abandon his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will show him mercy. Let him turn to our God, because he will abundantly pardon."

Three things stand out from this passage. First: Now is the time. God proclaims his Word to you now. If you won't listen, you may have no other opportunity to hear and believe. When you die, there is no second

chance. Scripture says we will either be sheep or goats, wheat or weeds, branches connected to the vine or those cut off from him and burned. Isaiah urges us: "Seek the LORD while he can be found!" Now is the time to listen to God's Word.

When we listen, what does God's Word tell us? That is the second point: We all need to recognize our own sinfulness. "Let the wicked man abandon his way," the Lord says. We chime in, "Go get those wicked people, God!" Except he means us, not someone else. Our thoughts are evil. We rebel against his perfect demands. Compare what goes through your mind with the Ten Commandments. Don't! Do! Isn't it obvious how far you are from measuring up to God's holiness?

Admitting our own sinfulness seems un-helpful. Shouldn't we be more positive and uplifting? Acknowledging our sin is important because God threatens judgment on sinners. If we continue in our wicked ways, thinking they are acceptable – if we are oblivious to our peril – we will not escape God's wrath. Only by God's mercy can we be rescued!

That's the third thing to remember. The LORD has acted in mercy to rescue sinners. Isaiah recorded this promise: "Turn to the LORD, and he will show him mercy ... he will abundantly pardon." God sent his Son to take the place of sinners and declare them righteous. Jesus died to pay for all sins. He rose again, removing the curse of God's anger and giving us peace. You have received mercy – your sins are forgiven!

God's Word is the key to these three truths. Without the revealed Word we would never be able to seek and find the truth about God. Without the Word, we would never know how hopeless our sinful situation is. Without the Word, we would never receive mercy, believing in Jesus as our Savior. The Word of God works! It has not returned empty, but has accomplished what God desires: We are his dear children by faith in Jesus.

Just as it has worked on us today, God's Word has worked throughout history. If you will remember those three points (now is the time, know your sin, Jesus alone saves), I want to show how God has consistently worked by his Word in every age.

Let's go all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had disobeyed God and eaten the forbidden fruit. They thought they could do things their own way and be just like God. Their reasoning was wrong. Sin brought shame and sorrow, not glory and goodness. God did not wait. He came right away to speak with them. Now is the time. God called them to repentance. Adam and Eve admitted their guilt. God proclaimed his promise of a Savior to come. The Word worked, and they believed.

Jump ahead in history to the kingdom of Israel. As a nation they

were set apart to be God's holy people. They turned aside time after time. They thought they could worship the false gods Baal and Ashtoreth and still be God's people. They reasoned that as long as the temple stood in Jerusalem, they would be safe. They were wrong. God sent prophets to tell them now is the time to return to the LORD. Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Hosea and Haggai and others impressed on the people their sinfulness and God's mercy. Now is the time, as God proclaimed his Word. It worked, and many Israelites repented, believing in the promised Savior.

Let's go to the time of Christ. Jesus preached and taught throughout the land, saying "The kingdom of heaven is near!" Jesus was rejected by the religious leaders who thought they could get to God by their own actions. The people turned away from Jesus because he was not the political leader they wanted. Even the disciples misunderstood him and doubted his message. God showed his mercy. Jesus' death and resurrection won the victory over sin and Satan. When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, they boldly and clearly proclaimed God's Word. "Sinners, repent, and believe the Good News!"

Throughout the history recorded in the Bible, God worked powerfully by his Word. It did not return to him empty, but accomplished his desire. Sinners repented of their sin and believed the Savior Jesus.

Though Jesus has defeated Satan, danger still lurks. Satan wants to share hell with as many as possible. Just like with Eve, he tries to turn God's people away from the Word. He wants us to trust our reason, our works, ourselves – anything but the Word! Yet, God continues to work by his Word. In the history of the church, we can see God's activity following the same pattern: now is the time, turn from your sin, trust God's mercy.

The occasion we recognize today is the presentation of the Augsburg Confession. In the 1500's the pure gospel was nearly lost. Tradition became more important than the Bible. Working to please God covered up God's promises. Greed and the hunger for power permeated every area of the church. Yet, the powerful Word of God still worked.

Now was the time. Through a handful of reformers, God brought back clear gospel preaching. We take it for granted, but this was new to their ears: God's mercy is freely given! We are saved, not by our works, but by God's free and undeserved love! This is the gospel that was long hidden.

Opposition to the gospel was strong. The existing church insisted on affirming its errors and condemning the truth. The Lutherans prepared the Augsburg Confession to show how God's Word had worked on them. They confessed their utter sinfulness and their trust in God's free pardon in Christ. This is what the Bible says! Now is the time to stand up. On June

25, 1530, they confessed their faith before God, emperor, rulers, and people. The Augsburg Confession is a clear statement of what we Lutherans believe. It stands as testimony still today that God's Word works.

We can see God's continued work in the history of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. In 1850 the settlers of America faced an uncertain religious future. Which way would they go? Would they follow their own reason and works and accept a church that proclaimed less than the free grace of God? Our Synod began with an unclear message that did not match the Scripture's teaching.

God worked through his Word to raise up those who preached and taught clearly. Within a decade of our Synod's founding, the message proclaimed from the pulpit and classroom was the same as Isaiah's that we are considering today: Now is the time to seek the Lord in his Word, to know our sinfulness, and to trust God's promises.

We don't often talk about the Augsburg Confession, or any of the Lutheran Confessions except Luther's Small Catechism. That is because they say the same thing as the Scripture, and we turn first to God's Words for our comfort and spiritual growth. Yet the Confessions are valuable expressions of faith in a hostile world. Though we see decay, lament apathy and worry about our future, we stand with those who confess the Truth.

Now is the time! "Seek the LORD while he can be found! Call on him while he is near! Let the wicked man abandon his way. Let an evil man abandon his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will show him mercy. Let him turn to our God, because he will abundantly pardon." Now is the time for us to know our sinfulness. Our sins are numerous and bring God's judgment! Now is the time to trust God's mercy. He forgives in Christ Jesus! Now is the time for children to know their Bible, their hymnal, and their catechism. Now is the time for parents to model the Christian life for their families. This is not the time for laziness or apathy. Now is the time for a new generation, our generation, to stand firm on God's Word and to confess it clearly.

The Word has always worked to provoke bold confessions of God's truth. Eve named her son after the promise of a Savior. The prophets spoke though no one seemed to listen. Jesus died for those who rejected him. At the Reformation, the confessors stood on God's Word in the face of death, presenting the Augsburg Confession. That Confession is our confession because it faithfully says what the Bible says. No matter the fears we have, or the opposition we face, the Word of God works! Now is the time. Know your sinfulness. Trust Jesus your only Savior. By his Word, God accomplishes his desire, the saving of many souls. SDG Amen.