

“Will you take it all back?” The question lingered in the air like Maryland humidity in July. The interrogator with clenched fists waited for a response. This Lutheran epidemic needed to be quarantined for good. Was it worth losing life over? Was this a stand that was really necessary? As church leaders scowled, the lingering question was no longer left answered. “I refuse.” “I will stand.” For you Lutheran historians, maybe your mind is painting the picture of the Diet of Worms, where 500 years ago in 1521, Martin Luther, declared perhaps the most famous three-word phrase of the Reformation: “Here I stand.” But the scene sketched before us today happened two years later. Two young men, Hendrik Voes and Johann van Esschen made a stand that not even Luther got to make. These two men, studying to be priests, had gotten their hands on Luther’s books. For the first time, God’s grace was clear, his compassion realized. They couldn’t contain their joy! No matter whom they met, God’s grace was on the tip of their tongues. They stood on the foundation of Christ crucified for the sins of all. Their joy was discovered, especially by those who hated them for it. After their stand, they were led to a fire ready to be lit. And as the flames erupted, they sang, “We praise you, O God, we acclaim you as Lord!” A melody that silenced the cackling flames. Luther, when he heard of the first two martyrs of the Reformation, wrote through tears, “Still, still, though dead, they speak, and, trumpet tongued... the One Enduring Name.” Hendrik and Johann took their stand among the saints who sacrificed all for their King. Where do you stand?

If you are like me, these tales of heroic Christians are simultaneously inspiring and crippling. Inspiring in that these saints stared down the cold, heartless face of death, and laughed with joy through flames. Crippling as I examine myself and find fear if the Lord would call me to stand alongside them, will I be able to stand my ground? Where do you stand?

Over 1500 years before Luther nailed his 95 theses, Jesus’ disciples were too busy temple-gazing to even think about such a stand. It’s the middle of Holy Week, the air of celebration is everywhere as Jerusalem is packed for the Passover celebration. As they look at the magnificent Jerusalem Temple, Jesus sparks a conversation none of the disciples wanted to discuss.

As Jesus stared into the reality of Good Friday, he reveals the reality that lies in wait for those who follow the cross behind him. **“Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many.”** Jesus-imposters are going to come? And people are *going to believe it?* How can this happen? All these questions popping one after the next in the disciples’ minds, but Jesus is just getting warmed up. **“When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.”** Is that all, Jesus?? Not even close! **“Earthquakes, famines,”** natural disasters. The forces of politics and nature colliding, and this is only the *beginning of the end!*

It feels like Jesus is speaking directly to us today! Think of the chaos we have grown used to. So-called “Christian” leaders hiding the good news of God’s grace, and offering in its place a karma-like sermon, “If you love God, then God will love you!” Think of the constant wars in the Middle East, the rumors of wars in East Asia. Think of the deep divides in our own country, our own people fighting one another over how to view COVID, seeking to cut each other down

because of differing political views, seeking to demean and humiliate each other to prove one cause to be more right than the other. The context of a vexed and distorted world!

But then the context becomes personal. It's not just our environment that will change. It's our own being too. Jesus doesn't mince words for the fate of those who follow him, "**You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me, you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them.**" Where do you stand? Are you ready to face this adversity? Are you ready to follow Jesus? Will you carry your cross and stand it up beside his?

How can you and I feel ready for this? If God called us to such a moment, how can we expect to make our stand? It's hard enough when people ask you and me what our weekend plans are, and we feel nervous about including church in our reply. It's difficult enough, when peer pressure is pinning you and me and we can't stand up for our Savior. How can Jesus expect us to be willing at every second to give the ultimate sacrifice for him, when making even the tiniest of sacrifices makes us shake and concede our identity in him?

You and I we all love the idea of outreach, of bringing people into Jesus' arms, but often we try to create our own environment for where to accomplish that. We imagine a world where everyone will love us for being Christian. A world where we aren't considered "out-dated," "bigoted," "unloving," or even "heartless." But the environment where "**the gospel must be preached**" is the very reality we have maybe learned to cope with too well.

Jesus tells us like it is. You and I must expect people to try to deceive us from the truth of the Bible. You and I must expect this world to get worse and worse, not better and better. You and I must expect to experience separation, abuse, cyber bullying, lies, shaming, and pain because we look to the cross of Jesus. You and I can't hide who we are. You and I cannot seek acceptance from a world we aren't meant for. You and I must take up the baton of our Christian ancestors before us, passed from Abel to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, John the Baptist to Stephen, Hendrik and Johann, to Nigerian martyrs today.

But you know as well as I, the devil and our sin-stained hearts force us to introspection and we find so much fear, so much timidity, so much hesitancy to be a light that stands out in this darkness. We feel unworthy for such a calling. We feel like failures for the cause of Christ. The calling is too much. Where do you stand? So often, it feels like you and I are standing as far away from Jesus as possible. We stand away from pain and standing out. We stand in the shadows, ashamed of our witness weakness.

But this is where we have it all wrong.

It's not up to you to arrive at the place Jesus longs for you to stand. You will be carried there by none other than God himself. When you find yourself ashamed because you hide the fact that you go to church, or guilty that you hide how important Jesus is to you from your family, friends, and coworkers, remember who you really are. Remember how highly Jesus values you. He

considers you to be of so much worth that he left his home so you could be there with him. He values you so much that without you being in his family, God's family simply wouldn't be complete. He loves you so dearly that he faced every kind of rejection and hurt so he could wipe every tear from your tears. He is so passionate that you know and see the forgiveness he has for you for all your embarrassment and fear, that he wrote a book with thousands of promises and assurances of his love for you. He has not put in front of you a life you are unable to live. He has placed before you a one-way ticket into the deepest room in his heart. He has called you to stand up, stand out, and stand your ground, because his grace will empower you to do just that.

His strong voice gentles our scared beyond belief hearts, **“Do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.”** You don't have to strategize what to say when your back is up against the wall for your faith! You don't have to worry about making Jesus look bad. You don't have to document every logical reason why it's important for you as a parent to teach your kids about Jesus so Facebook can know you're right! You don't need to be worried that when you're called to make a stand for Jesus that you won't come through. You will. You will because of who Jesus has made you to be. You will stand because of the One who stood tall above the forces of the evil and not only lived to tell the tale, but lived so we could live the victorious life with Him!

That's what made Shadrach special. That's what made Stephen special. That's what made Martin Luther special. That's what makes you special. We celebrate Reformation Day, not merely to celebrate Luther's life, but to reflect on the impact of God's grace. Jesus will preserve his gospel. His church will stand. The Word will always remain. And you know the other-worldly blessing behind it all? That he has chosen you to be the voice the Holy Spirit will use to continue the legacy of Jesus. So where do you stand?

When you speak with your child who has drifted from church and the faith, you no longer worry how to talk with her about it, you trust as the child of God you are, that he will guide you in having that most loving conversation of all. When you face the prospect of losing friends, because you know where you stand with God, you trust he will send Christian brothers and sisters to pick you back up. When you risk upsetting a professor or losing your job, you don't hesitate to stand for the truth. Because you stand on the foundation of Jesus, and the promises of the Bible, you stiff-arm the devil and his self-abasing accusations against you. You stand your ground even as we walk in the context of chaos, because Jesus alone gives stability. He alone holds you steady. He alone stands beside you.

So, let's stand beside one another. Come hell or high water, let nothing move us from Jesus and him alone! Andy, Kelly, and Nathan, I couldn't be more overjoyed for you to stand with us as we embark on the greatest adventure imaginable, entering the dying world of chaos and bringing the living word of Jesus, who has given us a peace the world cannot snatch away.

Where do you stand? By faith, you stand fearlessly arm and arm with the cross-bearers who have gone before you. You lock arms with your brothers and sisters in Christ here and all

throughout the world. You stand on the church's one foundation. You send worry packing. You stand on Jesus, a mighty fortress, our rock who will never be shaken. Amen.