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Lutherans have been waiting for this month for 500 years! Congratulations! You have been blessed to live and experience it! That's because on the 31st for this month we will celebrate the 500th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther's Reformation.

It all started rather innocuously. First, there was the rather backwater locale: Germany, which consisted of about 400 variously sized governmental states each with their own leaders and laws. Second, the Roman Catholic church was the biggest landowner in all of Europe and therefore the richest and most powerful force on the continent. The Pope in Rome didn't command any army, but he did hold an unshakable sway over Charles V of the Hapsburg dynasty who "ruled" almost everything. Since Rome taught that they were God's visible church on this earth, they also were the sole possessors of the keys to heaven. If they didn't like someone they could block them from going to heaven and declare them a heretic which meant that person could be killed, exiled, or generally reduced to penury. About a hundred years before the Reformation they did just this to the King of France, forcing him to wait outside a fortress in the Alps amid a winter snow-storm for a few days. (He also was without any shoes and only a cloak!) All this in order to have him toe-the-line and submit to the Pope's authority who resided inside that fortress.

Rome thought it could do whatever it pleased. After all, who could oppose them? So, when the scion of the Medici family of Florence, the biggest bankers of the day, assumed the papacy as Pope Leo X, he needed to raise money to build a monument to himself called: St. Peter's in Rome. Like many wealthy people, Leo wouldn't dream of using his own money. Instead, his minions seized on the novel idea of fleecing the "stupid" Germans by selling something called a plenary (full) indulgence. This was a piece of paper, stamped by the Pope's people which was for the forgiveness of all sins committed by that person. All sins meaning: past, present, and future ones. You can guess what people did with them. Armed with an indulgence you could go to the local whorehouse and have a good time without any worry from your priest. You could steal whatever you wished in the marketplace and not be called to account. I guess you could also beat people up or perhaps even kill someone you didn't like and no one could hold the fires of hell over your head!

At this time, there was a river separating the two sections of Saxony in Germany. There was electoral Saxony on one side and Ducal Saxony on the other. They had different leaders who were related. In his kingdom, Electoral John set up a new university in the town of Wittenburg. This time period was the blossoming of the Renaissance in Europe and new learning was in vogue. The school called a newly minted doctor of Old Testament called: Martin Luther to the staff. Meanwhile, a papal monk named John Tetzel appeared on the other side of the river, Ducal Saxony, which allowed the selling of indulgences. Elector John

did not. Again, you can guess what happened. People from Electoral Saxony went across the river to buy them, showed up in their churches, and told their priests that they didn't have to go to confession or repent of their sins because their indulgence said otherwise. It was getting out-of-control by the time All Saint's Day rolled around on November 1st of 1517. Dr. Luther viewed all this as an abomination. It made a mockery of Christ's sacrifice on the cross for us. It reduced the Gospel to nothingness. So, the night before All Saint's Day when everyone was expected to attend mass, Dr. Luther posted 95 theses on the subject for public debate. He nailed them to the door of the Castle Church thus starting the Reformation. Very quickly the people operating the Guttenberg printing press mass produced them, sold them around Europe, and people were up-in-arms against Rome! The Reformation had begun.

The rest is history. Northern German states such as Electoral Saxony became Lutheran in their faith while many southern German states stayed with Rome. The rest of Europe did much the same. The fault lines for the coming 100 year's war and the shape of future borders was determined by Luther nailing those theses upon that door. But aside from the political ramifications, the most important results were spiritual. People began to realize that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, had completely paid for their sins on the cross. That God didn't demand righteousness from them which they could not give, but freely gave them His righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. Guilt of conscience was replaced by freedom of the spirit. Now they knew God's truth which set them free.

Of course, Rome declared Luther a heretic who could be killed on sight. More importantly, God protected him for another 30 years until he died a natural death. And during those years Luther's protégé, Dr. Philip Melanchthon, set up schools for the masses, thus becoming the father of public education. Science, industry, and commerce flourished in the Lutheran enclaves. The foundations of Western culture were laid and went on to influence the entire world.

And it all began with one humble monk in one non-descript town in backwater Germany! Luther said it well: "One man, armed with Scripture, can take on the world." He did and it worked. That's because God's Word is truth and truth always triumphs over untruth or evil. The Reformation began and continues on today with Truth as its spearhead. Let's hope and pray that it continues to shine its light into sin-darkened hearts in our topsy-turvy world! For it is the "Truth that sets us free." On this 500th anniversary of the Reformation we rejoice over our Godly heritage!