

Reformation Sunday  
October 25, 2018

First Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Portland, Oregon

Pastor Aaron: Reformation Sunday is a time to celebrate our heritage as Lutherans, and this morning we would like to share with you a story that suggests something of how rich and powerful that heritage is, and not just in Luther's lifetime in the 1500s, but also in our lifetimes. Just 30 years ago the Lutheran church played a significant role in the end of communism in East Germany. The faith witnessed to by Luther, but also nurtured by more recent Lutheran thinkers like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemoller, provided the spark that led to a peaceful and historic revolution.

Ralph, James, Sue and Shigemi traveled last summer to Germany as part of one of Ralph's other choirs – the Bach Cantata Choir. The purpose of their trip was to visit and sing in a number of churches where Johann Sebastian Bach worked during his life in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As you will hear, though, while they thought they were going learn about Bach, they actually learned about much more – for one of Bach's churches, the St. Nicholas church in Leipzig, was also the very church where the "peaceful revolution" of 1989 started.

Ralph: It is a story that we didn't understand when we first planned our trip to the former East Germany areas where both Martin Luther and Johann Sebastian Bach lived and worked. In many ways, it is a story that changed each of us – making us realize how blest we are, but also how proud we were of the courage of some pretty amazing Lutheran pastors. In this story, Sue and Shigemi will be our narrators; James will play the part of Pastor Christian Fürher, the pastor the St. Nicholas church in Leipzig, Germany. Since nobody wanted them, I will play the parts of the "bad guys" and in particular the Stasi – or East German Secret Police.

Narrator 1: At the end of World War II, those areas of Germany, in the Eastern section that had been occupied by the Soviet Union became the country of East Germany – or the German Democratic Republic – known as the GDR. They became a protectorate of the Soviet Union, and member of what was known as the Warsaw Pact.

Narrator 2: The East German regime limited the freedoms of the people – especially the freedom to travel outside East Germany. In the early 1960s, the East German regime constructed the Berlin Wall in order to keep East Germans from escaping to the West.

Narrator 1: In order to further protect the regime, an extensive secret police, known as the Stasi, spelled S-T-A-S-I was formed. It is estimated that there were over 80,000 Stasi agents – and hundreds of thousands of informants. The Stasi infiltrated almost every aspect of East German life.

Stasi: We were very good at what we did. We had a file on everyone in the GDR. We had informants placed in every apartment building, every workplace, and in every place people gathered. We placed listening devices in areas where we suspected there were dissidents and subversives. We read every piece of mail coming into and going out of the GDR. Subversive behavior was dealt with immediately.

Narrator 2: People were afraid to say anything against the government – even at home. You never knew if your uncle, or cousin, or even spouse, might be a Stasi informant.

Narrator 1: In 1969, the government destroyed a Leipzig treasure – they dynamited the old University Church. This was one of the four churches that Bach had worked in. The people of Leipzig were incensed. They protested, but the protests were quickly put down.

Stasi: We quickly rounded up the instigators. They were dealt with harshly. The authorities in Berlin was very proud how quickly we got rid of this problem.

Narrator 1: When Mikail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union and instituted a policy of more openness in the Soviet Union, there started to be a strong desire in East Germany to gain freedom. President Reagan's words, spoken at the Berlin Wall, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall" were heard loud and clear by the East German people, especially the youth – who were becoming more and more disenfranchised with the authoritarian regime.

Narrator 2: In the midst of all of this, in 1981, a Lutheran Pastor named Christian Fürher in Leipzig Germany (about 100 miles south of Berlin) decided to simply hold a meeting on a Monday night at his church.

Furher: Rather than meet in a secret room, we met in main church. I just wanted to give these young people an opportunity to express themselves. I also wanted them to hear the word of God – so we always read the Sermon on the Mount. I gave each person a candle – and I laid out, on the floor of the church by the altar, a large wooden cross. When each person spoke, the speaker would first put his or her candle on the cross, and then talk about their feelings or whatever was on their mind. I thought only a handful would show up, but about a 100 people came. The meeting started at 10pm, but lasted well past midnight.

Narrator 1: These meetings continued every Monday night. Always with the same format – scripture readings, a cross in the center, prayers, and candles. Pastor Fürher felt good about how this gave people an opportunity to talk, and helped them go on with their daily lives. He also was happy that the Gospel was shared each week – especially to these young people – most of whom had not heard it before.

Narrator 2: Sometimes the meetings would have only a few people in attendance. But by the end of the 1980s, hundreds of people would come.

Stasi: Of course, we came too. We made notes of everyone who did come. At times, we met with Pastor Fuhrer and asked him to stop. But he never preached against the government – only read from the Bible, prayed, lit candles and let people talk. We could not pin anything bad on him. So, we let the meetings continue. After all, they were harmless.

Narrator 1: In May, 1989, there was a local election in Leipzig that was widely viewed as corrupt. The people had enough. Now hundreds, sometimes as many as a thousand came to the weekly Monday evening meetings.

Narrator 2: In early October 1989, Mikail Gorbachev visited Berlin to celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the GDR. This was the catalyst for a series of events that changed the country.

Furher: We had a prayer meeting scheduled for Monday, October 9, 1989. Word got out that there would be a massive demonstration in the street that evening. We anticipated that the church would be very full.

Stasi: We had orders from on high to be sure to stop any demonstrations by whatever means possible. The leader of the GDR, Erich Honecker, did not want to embarrass Gorbachev. We moved thousands of troops into Leipzig. We ordered extra blood for blood banks, and all hospitals were to on full alert. We had tanks and live ammunition.

Furher: My phone rang constantly that day. People were scared. Many people decided that only one family member would come – in case there was violence. The service was supposed to begin at 5pm.

Stasi: We had plans to shut down this service – but we didn't want to upset the people even more. We barricaded the driveways. Since the church is always open, we simply decided to fill the church with Stasi – over 1000 Stasi agents filled the church by 2pm.

Furher: I understood what was happening. I closed the large balconies (after all, the Nicholas church holds over 2000 people) to be sure that others could get in. Other churches, including the nearby and very large St. Thomas Church – a church where Luther himself had preached - opened their doors as well. And since I knew that the Stasi would have to be there for at least three hours before the service, I went, talked to them and preached the gospel to them.

Stasi: Pastor Furher came and did something rather amazing – he came and greeted each of us as if we were first-time guests at his church. He shook all of our hands. And then he read the Sermon on the Mount. He especially talked about how Jesus asks us to love our enemies.

Furher: We must remember that the Gospel is a powerful tool. I could see on this evening that many of the Stasi were very moved by Jesus's words. By 5pm we were packed – thousands filled every corner of the church. We preached about the love of Jesus. We read the gospel, we prayed, and we lit candles. At the end of service, the Bishop and all the clergy present implored the people not be violent. "Keine Gewalt. No Violence." And we asked them to hold lit candles in their hands when they went out into the street. A person holding a candle can't throw a rock, or hit someone. A person holding a candle will never be violent. When we opened the doors, we saw an amazing site. Over 70,000 people were in the streets, most of them holding candles, and peacefully chanting, "Wir sind das Volk" or "We are the People."

Narrator 1: The crowd marched from the Nicholas church to the main ring road – around the great Opera House and the Gewandhaus concert hall. There was no violence.

Stasi: We did not want this protest to succeed. One of our strategies was to place undercover agents in the crowd to “agitate” the crowd to violence. If there was violence, we would have a good excuse to deal with it harshly and shut down the protest.

Narrator 2: The people knew about this strategy and had organized into groups that were looking for these “agitators”. Every someone began to act violently – they surrounded the person and said, “Keine Gewalt” or No Violence.

Stasi: Orders had been given by Berlin to shoot. But our local chief said that, if there was no violence, then we would not shoot. There never was any violence.

Fuhrer: It was really a miracle, and it worked. At the end of the evening, not one window was broken, not one person hurt. No shots fired. Late in the evening, everyone simply returned home. However, life in East Germany after that was never the same.

Narrator 1: Unknown to the Stasi, there was a cameraman in the steeple of one of the neighboring churches. A video was made of the protest and smuggled into West Germany. It appeared the next night on West German television. The world knew what happened.

Narrator 2: The next Monday night, there were huge protests in towns throughout East Germany – especially Erfurt, Dresden, Berlin, and of course Leipzig. Still. No violence.

Stasi: We had no idea what to do. We had planned for everything, down to the tiniest detail. Everything except candles and prayers.

Furher: Within two weeks the leader of the GDR Erich Honecker resigned.

Stasi: Then came a series of many blunders. In early November, our leadership, decided to let people pass through the Berlin Wall. We would, of course, tightly control this.

Narrator 1: But on the evening of November 4, 1989, hundreds of thousands of East Berliners arrived at the wall. The Government orders were all mixed up and people simply began to cross over.

Stasi: Frantic phone calls were made to headquarters. We had no idea what to do. No leader told us anything. People just started going through the checkpoints, and even climbing over the wall. You can't stop a crowd that large.

Narrator 2: The wall was history. The regime collapsed. Within a few months, Germany was reunited. What started as candles and prayer, ended with a peaceful overthrow of one of the most repressive regimes in history.

Ralph: We wanted to tell you this story – but there is a little more that you should know about. First, I'd like to thank Professor Roger Newell from George Fox College, who is here in attendance today, for writing a book about this story (which I have loosely quoted in this presentation) and making me aware of it. Dr. Newell actually met Pastor Furher on a visit to

Leipzig with some of his students from George Fox University. Last summer, the 4 of us were able to sing in the Nicholas Church. As I conducted the wonderful music of Bach – in this church where Bach himself conducted, I was keenly aware that behind me, on a single altar, was a solidity candle. At the end of the concert, I addressed the audience and said these words, “We are so honored and blessed to be able to sing in this great church – a church where Bach himself conducted over 250 years ago. But we are also honored to be in this church that has meant so much to so many people in recent history. We will end our program by singing Bach’s great plea for peace, Dona Nobis Pacem, as a way to honor those who lit candles in this church and prayed for peace.” When this was translated in German, there was an audible recognition from the audience and applause. During the Gathering of Gifts today, we will sing that Dona Nobis Pacem for you.

Pastor Aaron – One of Martin Luther’s core convictions was that the Church is always being renewed and reformed by God’s gracious call. The power of the Gospel brings forth new life and a fresh sense of purpose among God’s people. Celebrating our heritage today offers an opportunity to look back and give thanks for the grace given to previous generations—whether it was Martin Luther’s generation in the 1500s, or the generation that saw the Berlin Wall come down in 1989. Today also invites us to consider what sort of faithful future God’s Word is inviting us to step toward, and work toward and pray toward. I wonder what treasures you’ve experienced in the Lutheran tradition that can be brought out to serve the needs of God’s beloved human family and God’s precious creation in our time. Perhaps recognizing the dignity of all of God’s children is leading you to act for compassion and truth, maybe even reaching across differences to make connections and create community. Or perhaps honoring God as Creator is leading you to care for God’s creation. The Lutheran tradition isn’t something only in the past—and in the present it wants to catch every one of us up to make us partners with God in God’s great work of love and healing. Thanks be to God. Amen