# God Reforms Us

## A Service for Reformation Sunday

*by Rev. Ryan Slifka*

### Greeting

### Call to Worship (based on Psalm 90)

God is our dwelling place from year to year, age to age.
And yet, we become complacent, forgetting who we are.

God reforms us **and makes prosperous the work of our hands!**

God’s life surges forth through creation, like grass that renews every morning.
And yet we prefer to be dust, swept away in the wind of every new idea and new fad.

God reforms us **and makes prosperous the work of our hands!**

God turns to us, and has compassion on us,
so the great work of our lives manifests Christ’s glorious love to the world.

God reforms us **and makes prosperous the work of our hands!**

### Processional/Opening Hymn

“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (VU 262)

### Prayer of the Day

Wondrous God:
Thirteen billion years ago your creative spark called creation into being.
Two thousand years ago you lit a spark of new creation in Christ.
Five hundred years ago, your grace reignited the hearts of men and women
with names like Martin Luther, John Calvin, Katharina Zell, Ulrich Zwingli, and Argula von Grumbach.
Just when we think all is settled, everything is finished, closed,
your power and presence explodes on to the scene yet again, bringing newness, bringing life.
Fill us with your power and presence, O God,
so we may, like our grandparents in faith
carry your truth, your beauty, and your justice to the world you so love—a world in such need.
In Jesus’ name. Amen.

### Invitation to Confession

An important outcome of the Protestant Reformation was the rediscovery of the doctrine of grace—the unmerited, unconditional love of God that reaches out to us even before we reach out to God. And as the great Reformer John Calvin once wrote,\* the knowledge of God begins with knowledge of ourselves. To know ourselves is to know our places of brokenness. And to know God is to know that in Christ, God’s love stretches so deep and wide that it infiltrates every broken place in our hearts and in our world. God knows the depth of our hearts and will never turn away or turn us away. So let’s offer up our lives in confession, trusting that we can be honest before God and each other without fear. Let us pray.

*\** in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*

### Prayer of Confession

Living God,
You are the One who is always on the move,
always creating and re-creating,
always doing a new thing.
And yet, we confess, O Lord,
that our lives can become static,
routinely paralyzed by doubt and fear.
We remain ossified in patterns of greed,
covetousness, and self-interest.
We doubt your promises of abundant, everlasting life
and so we live in dread of our neighbours,
our friends, and our enemies.
Our souls remain still.
We do not love as you love.
Nor do we live as you would have us live,
with courage, generosity or the boldness of the gospel.

So in the silence of our hearts,
we offer up to you those things we have done and those we have left undone.
*(short silence)*

Forgive us, O God.
Renew us by your Spirit,
and reform us with your compassion,
remaking us more fully in to the image of Christ,
and as nimble servants of your reign.
Amen.

### Assurance of Grace

Friends,
the good news of the gospel
is that God’s love in Christ stretches so deep and so wide
that it infiltrates every broken place in our hearts
and in our world.
Our hatred is met with love,
our cruelty is met with compassion,
our sins and our trespasses are met with forgiveness.
It is greater than anything you have ever done,
or could do.
Open your hearts to let the love of God in,
because in Christ you are forgiven, freed, made new.
Believe in this great good news.
Amen.

### Hymn of Praise/Doxology

“God of the Bible (Fresh as the Morning)” (MV 28)

### Prayer for Illumination

Holy One,
We prefer you as an architect,
whose desire is to construct for us perfect lives.
And yet, the witness of the scriptures says otherwise.
No, your Word is explosive, it is a live wire,
one that electrifies all who are within range.

By the power of your Holy Spirit
shine yet more light forth from your Holy Word,
shocking our hardened hearts back to life
with your freely given grace.

This we pray through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

### Scripture

Deuteronomy 34:1–12

### Sermon

“Are We There Yet?” *(a model sermon follows at the end of this document)*

### Hymn of the Day

“My Life Flows On” (VU 716)

### Prayers of the People

God of Grace and God of Glory,
On this Reformation Sunday, we give you thanks for the saints who have gone before us.
For those who faced trouble and trial, and even death,
for the sake of the message of your mercy
and in the spirit of Pentecost, the right to hear and read the scriptures in their own languages.

We pray especially for those who now face trouble, trial, even death,
for those members of the body of Christ who face persecution.
For your beloved children everywhere—regardless of tradition—
who live under the threat of religious persecution.
For people, especially those of us who are Indigenous, who face the extinction of our own languages through neglect, oppression, or cultural pressure.
We pray that all may hear the good news of the Prince of Peace in ways that resonate,
and cause us to drop our weapons and defences for the sake of the kingdom.

We pray that you may help us not only walk in the shoes of our forebears, but fill them.
May all of us gathered here today be as captivated by the life you have given us in Christ
that we are freed to reach our friends, neighbours, and enemies with your unconditional love.

Lord, we pray for the world you love
in hope, and in trust,
that we and your church might carry the light that has been passed down through the centuries,
so we might be a beacon of your love to the world.
Amen.

### Invitation to the Offering

The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth once said that grace and gratitude go together like heaven and earth. The Way of Jesus Christ is the life lived in gratitude for the God who as created us and claimed us as her own. In gratitude for God’s gifts, let’s give back to God our gifts of time, talent, and treasure for God’s mission in the world. The offering will now be received.

### Offering Prayer

Receive these gifts O God,
use them to reform this community of faith
as you remake the world in your image.
We ask this is Jesus’ name. Amen.

### Closing Hymn

“You Are Holy (Hamba nathi)” (MV 45)

### Commissioning

Go out into the world,
living in the light of Christ!
By the power of the Spirit
do all the good you can
by all the means you can
in all the ways you can
in all the places you can
at all the times you can
to all the people you can
as long as ever you can.

*—words attributed to John Wesley*

### Blessing

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be yours this day, and every other one.
Amen.

## Sermon: “Are we there yet?”

*(on Deuteronomy 34:1–12)*

“Are we there yet?” These words are familiar to anyone who has been a child, or been on a long road trip with a child. It doesn’t matter where *there* is, it’s always better than sitting in perpetual seatbelt limbo.

Our passage from Deuteronomy comes at the end of a long journey. God promised Moses and the Israelites that they would be brought to the promised land—a land of milk and honey. One that was the exact opposite of the decades they had spent in the oppressive slavery of Egypt. And yet, the journey was a long one. Moses and the Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the desert. I can’t stand how many times I have to hear “Are we there yet?” in a four-hour air-conditioned car ride, let alone 40 years of sweltering desert heat! It’s clear to me that if Moses had anything, he had patience. I’ve heard the phrase “the patience of Job” before, but I think Moses deserves a phrase like that too. He had incredible endurance.

Yes, Moses had something like superhuman patience. The kind that could have endured anything to the bitter end. But the problem is that Moses never makes it to the promised land. He arrives at the border. God takes him to the mountaintop and gives him a survey of the vastness of this new and beautiful country. But he never crosses over. Instead, he’s buried on the edge of the wilderness. I imagine Moses dying with the words “Are we there yet?” on his lips. Even Moses, one of the most faithful people, never actually arrived at his destination.

It seems unfair. Maybe that’s the point, though. No matter how gifted we might be, no matter how spiritually mature or intelligent we are. No matter how good we are, or how mystically connected to God we are, arrival at our human destination is always out of our grasp. There is a constant temptation for us. As individuals and churches we can see ourselves as having spiritually “arrived”—all grown up, having all the knowledge—while others simply need to catch up with us or pay attention to our wisdom. We have read all the right books, we are the most faithful or the most progressive. It’s always others who are the problem. Self-criticism is not an option once you have reached enlightenment. This is not only self-deceptive, it is arrogant and spiritually destructive. When we have “arrived,” there’s this sense that we can settle where we are. We are no longer moving forward, there’s no room for growth. When we have “arrived,” our only posture can be defence. And defensiveness.

As the people of Jesus, however, we understand human life and progress differently. It took a rabbi to teach me this. He told me that he believed that in the synagogue liturgy, many Jewish people read only the Pentateuch (the first five books) through cyclically, with this passage at the end, because there is always this sense that the promised land is still before them. The end of history is always just out of our grasp. And yet, it is the beauty of the promise, this vision of a world brought to completed harmony that makes life worth living.

We always live in the between time, either in our personal spiritualties or in the state of the world. While we can experience the presence of God’s kingdom here and now, there is always a “not yet.” As God’s people we are always yet to arrive. Which means we are never fully settled. There is always more ground to cover, always more forgiveness to seek, always more growth. God is still speaking afresh, and there is yet more light to shine forth from God’s Holy Word. It is a very Protestant way to be. There is a final destination, for sure—the beautiful coming of Christ, and the coming together of heaven and earth. But it hasn’t happened yet; it has yet to arrive, as do we.

Until then, though, we believe with our Reformed forebears, that the church is reformed and always being reformed by the Word of God. We are not fated to play defence. Nor are we fated to spiritual complacency and self-righteousness. Rather, with the end always in sight, we are freed to live faithfully and authentically, to keep striving for the kingdom, and to have our lives constantly renewed and remade by God’s Spirit.

“Are we there yet?” Not quite yet. But we will get there some day. In the meantime, we are always being drawn further out of the wilderness by Christ and deeper in to the heart of God. And that’s good news.

Amen.

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