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When Grace Comes
Luke 3:16

It was a dark and dreary morning when I arrived at the Wartburg Castle near Eisenach, Germany. The winding cobblestone lane leading up the hill to the castle was wet and slippery from an early morning rain. When the partially worn out tires of my taxi cab began to spin the driver apologized and said I would need to walk the rest of the way to the top. That turned out to be a blessing because the walk gave me a better view of this medieval castle which on this morning was shrouded in mist with the turrets just breaking into view. I wondered if Martin Luther had a similar view of the castle when he arrived in 1521.

When Luther came to the Wartburg Castle he was a fugitive from both religious and secular authorities. Luther had just appeared before the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and had refused to renounce his published writings as the authorities had demanded. Charles V then fell in line with the Pope and condemned Luther as a heretic. This meant that anyone could kill Luther and be fully absolved from guilt. This was a moment when Luther's life and his teaching seemed on the verge of being snuffed out. Luther came to the Wartburg Castle because the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise, believed that this controversial teacher should be protected. He ordered that a kidnapping be staged so that Luther could be secretly placed in the castle. It is fitting that Luther was in no way responsible for the arrangements that saved his life. For the central theme of both his teaching and his spiritual journey was grace.

As a young man Luther struggled desperately with the issue that is introduced by John the Baptist in the third chapter of Luke's gospel. In this passage John refuses to baptize some of the people who have come to him. This refusal is not based on making distinctions between who is and is not worthy to be baptized. John knows full well that none of his listeners are truly worthy. The distinction that John makes has to do with who is willing to be changed. John is working to prepare people for the new kingdom that Jesus will bring into being. John's baptism was for those who were willing to be transformed so that their lives could conform to the standards of this new kingdom.

When John's baptism is withheld people in the crowd begin to ask, "What then should we do (Luke 3:10)?" John instructs the crowd to begin living for the new kingdom by addressing the injustices of the world in which they live. He tells his listeners to share food and clothing with those who have none. If John were preaching today he would undoubtedly expand his list to include housing and healthcare, but we won't dwell on that today. John tells the tax collectors to let their work be guided by fairness rather than greed. He tells the soldiers to stop victimizing the public by threat, intimidation, and blackmail. Baptism is for those who are willing to undergo this kind of transformation. The power to change will be provided by the one who is to come, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (John 3:16). This is the one who brings a new kingdom of grace.

Luther's study of Scripture convinced him that the church is built on the power of grace to change lives. The kind of change John the Baptist called for cannot be created by our good works or good intentions. It must be the product of grace. One noted church historian has pointed out that from

the beginning of his public ministry Luther wanted to talk about grace, but his opponents wanted to talk about authority. For them the church was based on the authority which flows down from Pope to bishop to priest and finally to the laity (Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History*, pages 123-132). But Luther and his followers were convinced that the kind of change that really matters cannot be mandated from the top down. Real change happens when grace comes to transform our hearts. This kind of change flows from the bottom up.

The ten months that Luther spent at the Wartburg Castle was a time of great personal stress. He knew that going beyond the castle grounds would lead to his death. He chose to spend that time serving the grace which had put him on this dangerous journey. My tour of the castle ended in the small study where Luther worked for those ten months. It was a rustic and sparsely furnished room in the bailiff's lodge. This crude space was in striking contrast to the magnificent gleaming rooms where the important people stayed at the Wartburg Castle. Impressive parties were held in the Great Hall. Glorious musical performances were staged in the Singer's Hall which became the setting for Wagner's opera "Tannhauser." These were spaces where people wanted to be. But this was not Luther's arena.

The fugitive monk was tucked away in that dusty closet of a study where he was busy creating a new world. He was producing the first translation of the Bible into German, the language of the common people. That work of translation was soon picked up by other scholars providing Bibles in the common languages of French, English and Dutch. The source of the grace that transformed Luther's life would be accessible to anyone who could read. This grace, which John the Baptist promised, is alive today in a world that is still waiting to be changed.