JD ANDREWS, EARTHXPLORER MEDIA

Martin Luther statue in Eisleben, Germany

CHAPTER 1

AMONG THE LUTHERANS

If you want to change the world, pick up your pen and write.
Martin Luther

~ PILGRIMAGE ~
Martin Luther Sites in Germany

Once when I was visiting my parents, I mentioned an article I'd read about the rarity of blue eyes. "Less than one percent of all the people who've ever lived have had them," I said.

My mother made the snorting noise that is her most potent form of disapproval. "That's not right," she said. "It's at least half."

And in her world, she was right. Decorah, a small town in northeast Iowa, was settled by Norwegian immigrants in the 1850s. It's clung proudly to that identity ever since. The entire town is marinated in Norse-ness, from the gnome-like *nisse* peeking out the windows of many homes to Nordic Fest, the annual celebration of Norwegian culture and traditions.

In the Decorah of my youth, status depended upon how closely you adhered to the platonic ideal of Norwegianhood. A local pastor's family, for example, had a singing group, like the Von Trapps only they dressed up in Norwegian folk costumes instead of German ones. They were all impossibly talented and photogenic (rumor had it that they had given up two of their children for adoption because they weren't sufficiently blonde). It also helped if you were part of the founding families of Luther College, the town's liberal arts bastion affiliated with the Lutheran Church. Even if your blood wasn't pure, you could still fake it by dressing up in colorful ethnic outfits for Nordic Fest, held on one of the hottest weekends of the year despite that being the type of weather least like that in Norway.

Thankfully, my own bloodline was untainted, as all of my great-grandparents came from Norway. The cultural traditions remained so strong that both of my parents grew up in homes where Norwegian was nearly as common as English. Naturally, we were Lutheran, as was virtually everyone I knew as a child.

Along with other blue-eyed Lutherans, we attended a church near our farm about ten miles from town. Constructed from limestone that its members quarried themselves, it had a tall steeple that could be seen for miles across the surrounding fields of corn and soybeans. It must have cost the frugal farmers in the parish a considerable amount of money to build it in the 1870s, which is an indication of the importance of people's religious faith to their lives.

During my childhood, the parish was filled with the descendants of those farmers, hard-working men of few words, my father among them. (Here's my favorite joke about these farmers, told in its entirety: "Did you hear the one about the husband who loved his wife so much he almost told her?") They showed up in church nearly every Sunday when they weren't planting or harvesting, but their religious enthusiasm was

kept well under wraps. On Sunday mornings I was fascinated by one of our neighbors in particular, a farmer who nodded off as soon as the pastor started his sermon. His wife would dig her elbow into his ribs periodically, but he never stayed awake for long, dozing peacefully until the final hymn, at which time he would rise refreshed, having fulfilled his duty to God and his wife for another week.

In attending Sunday School as a young girl at this church, I learned three important things. One was that Jesus loved children, which I knew from the many pictures of him in a white robe, smiling as little boys and girls in 1950s clothes gathered around him. The second was that I should never marry a Catholic because if I was giving birth and it came to a choice between letting the baby die or letting the mother die, Catholics always wanted to save the baby. And third, I needed to memorize a lot of Bible verses so that if I was ever in a situation without any books—say if I was being held by the North Vietnamese—I would be so grateful to have lots of the Bible memorized to give me comfort and help me in my time of need.

As I grew older, my understanding of the Lutheran faith matured, though there were still some rough spots. For example, I was surprised to learn that Martin Luther, the founder of our church, was German. *How could this be?* I wondered. The only Lutherans I knew were Norwegian. It would have been acceptable, though not ideal, if he'd been Swedish or Danish—people who were a little foreign but still Scandinavian. But German? His nationality was an embarrassment, a stain on an otherwise unblemished biography. It wasn't dwelled upon in Sunday School classes, thankfully, as the primary focus was Luther's triumph over Catholic corruption, his emphasis on faith over works, his love of music, and his fondness for memorization.

In this Lutheran world, confirmation was nearly as important as marriage, a solemn rite for which we prepared by attending classes with

the pastor on Wednesday evenings. He was approaching retirement by the time I started these classes, and parents took turns sitting in the back to make sure he was teaching us properly, listening and watching intently like judges during the Olympics. My parents didn't do that, of course, as they'd never have dreamed they knew better than a pastor. But obviously other parents were worried—exactly about what, I wasn't sure, but it had something to do with the fact that religion was very important and very serious.

After two years of classes, I was confirmed at age 13, which meant I could finally partake of communion: a thin wafer that tasted nothing like bread and wine served in little cups on a silver tray. That first Sunday I was nervous, as I'd been told the wafer was hard to swallow unless you'd prepared yourself by having a lot of saliva in your mouth (I didn't think that was very reverent, even though the pastor had recommended it). Goodness knows that if I started to cough, that little cup of liquid wouldn't help much. But I took my first communion without a hitch, and afterwards there was a party at our house, at which people gave me cards filled with money that I was to use for something worthwhile (and not buy a pet monkey, like my cousin had done with her confirmation money).

The first ripple of diversity in my religious life came when a cousin of mine married a Catholic, much to the disapproval of the relatives. "The problem with Catholics," my mom said darkly, "is they think they can go to confession and be forgiven for *anything*." Which led me to wonder, what were those Catholics doing? I knew they drank more than we did—Lutherans could drink privately, but I'd heard that Catholics drank at parties, right in front of everyone. I guessed a lot of confessions involved alcohol.

This prohibition against Catholicism was so engrained that I felt a delicious frisson of naughtiness the first time I went to mass with a Catholic friend. I was fascinated by how different it was. Instead of

happy Jesus, surrounded by children, he was on a crucifix, looking sad. The church seemed huge and dark and mysterious, and it had a side altar dedicated to the Virgin Mary, even though as a Lutheran I knew the only time we were supposed to pay attention to her was during Advent and Christmas. The stained glass windows depicted saints with names I didn't know, and the entire church had an unfamiliar scent that I now recognize as incense, instead of the slightly antiseptic smell of Lutheran churches.

Given the Lutheran attitude towards Catholicism, it came as a terrible shock one Sunday in our country church when the word "catholic" suddenly appeared in the Apostle's Creed:

> I believe in the Holy Spirit,
> the holy catholic church, [instead of *Christian* church, as we had always said before]
> the communion of saints,
> the forgiveness of sins,
> the resurrection of the body,
> and the life everlasting. Amen.

Even though my parents weren't sensitive to theological nuances, they shared in the general dismay at this change. Oh, the pastor tried to explain it by saying there was a big difference between a small "c" (meaning universal) and a big "C" (meaning Roman Catholic), and the change in wording had nothing to do with expressing allegiance to the pope and we weren't going to be kneeling or praying to the Virgin Mary now or in the future, but there was nevertheless something deeply disturbing about this alteration in what we'd been saying since time immemorial, or at least since the church's services started being conducted in English instead of Norwegian.

It wasn't too long after this that yet another innovation was instituted: the passing of the peace, during which people were expected to greet those sitting next to them. This directive wasn't received very enthusiastically either, though at least it didn't imply outright heresy, as the change in the creed did. When that time in the service came, people stuck out their hands to their neighbors in the pew with eyes lowered, pulling them back quickly for fear of initiating a conversation:

"Peace be with you."

"Ja, you too."

The Lutheran church of my childhood had definite ways-of-doing-things that didn't have to be articulated, because everyone knew what they were. Church suppers had to include white buns with a slice of ham and American cheese, plus an array of "salads," as they were loosely termed, of various brilliant shades of Jell-O. After school was out for the summer, we attended Vacation Bible School, which turbocharged our memorizing (I got extra praise for being able to recite all the books of the Bible, reeling them off so fast that no individual names could be distinguished). And after we graduated from high school, many of us went to Lutheran colleges, where we could find another Lutheran to marry, thus escaping the dreaded possibility of ending up in a hospital one day trying to decide whether to kill ourselves or the baby.

In this world, being well-behaved was of paramount importance. I was, excessively so, earning good grades throughout my growing up years and pleasing my teachers so much that when I graduated from high school I was named Girl Citizen, an honor voted upon by the faculty and given to one girl from each graduating class. There was a Boy Citizen, too, making us a matched set. I wasn't entirely sure why

I received the honor, but I knew it had a lot to do with being nice to everyone, all the time. I'd achieved the equivalent of Eagle Scout rank in being a Good Girl.

As night follows day and summer spring, I, along with a good share of my graduating class, enrolled in Luther College. By then my mother was working in the college's cafeteria, and one of the perks of the job was free tuition. I received an excellent education there, one that taught me how to read critically, write well, and learn for myself. Because it's a Lutheran school, we had chapel several days a week, and during those services and in my classes I was introduced to a more mature form of the faith of my childhood.

But looking back, I can see how Lutheranism never truly took root in me. Because it was in the very air I breathed from the time I was born, it never had any mystery for me—and a search for mystery is what would soon start me on a lifetime of spiritual journeying. Like a character in a fairy tale, I've had to journey far to discover the treasures hidden close to home.

My college years were also circumscribed by the fact I never fit in socially. I wish I'd known about the universality of this feeling much earlier in my life, as it certainly would have saved some anxiety through the years. But when I was in college, everyone else appeared to be more sophisticated and worldly than me, especially the legions of tanned and athletic girls from the Twin Cities suburbs. They'd traveled widely and been cheerleaders and tennis players in their high schools. They knew how to wear make-up. And they weren't at Luther because their mothers worked in food service.

My college years passed, and despite walking by Martin Luther's statue every day on my way across campus, the faith of my childhood gradually slipped away.

My Lutheran Gordian Knot

Instead of writing about my childhood, I probably should just tell you to listen to reruns of Garrison Keillor's "News from Lake Wobegon." In describing small town Lutheranism in the upper Midwest, he's cornered the market on stories about hot dish suppers in church basements and taciturn Norwegian bachelor farmers (a redundancy, I realize). These are my people, God love 'em. I'm glad someone has chronicled their culture for posterity.

But in the midst of all the folksy nostalgia I admit to a certain ambivalence about my hometown. Whenever people hear I'm from Decorah, I've grown accustomed to their response: "Oh, what a nice town!" For years I agreed aloud and dissented privately, because stating that you aren't enthusiastic about Decorah is like announcing you hate puppies and kittens. Everybody loves Decorah. But for me, the town has conjured a complex mix of emotions.

Lutheranism was part of that same stewpot, because for years I equated it with conformity, a grim sense of duty, and judgmentalism. Even though I realized this wasn't fair—I knew many admirable Lutherans growing up—I still persisted in this estimation.

It didn't help that I had an unfortunate encounter with a Lutheran pastor at a surprise party for my mother's seventieth birthday at her church in Decorah. When the pastor asked how we'd gotten my mother into the building without letting her know about the party, I told her that I'd made up a story about a friend having an art exhibit there that I wanted her to see.

"You mean you lied to your mother," the pastor said.

When I laughed, assuming she was joking, she gave me a stern look, and though it had been many years since I was in Sunday School, I felt an immediate, Pavlovian response of guilt. This emotion was a

familiar part of my childhood, because there were many ways one could fail in attempting to lead a good Lutheran life. I'd done so once again.

Several years after that encounter, I finally began to reconsider my views on Decorah and Lutheranism after a seemingly ordinary event. My husband, Bob, had organized a volunteer day at a local park in our home of Iowa City, and a large group of Lutherans ranging from kids to the elderly signed up to work.

And did they work! Everybody knew how to use tools. They hacked, chainsawed, hoed, and clipped. Despite the chilly day, even the old guys were sweating. The group got through their tasks so quickly that Bob had to scramble to find enough activities to occupy them.

As Bob told me this story after he returned home, I couldn't help but contrast the energy and efficiency of the Lutherans to members of my own denomination, which by that time was the Episcopal Church. In a similar volunteer situation, I knew the group would have been much smaller. Of those who did sign up, several of us would cancel that morning. At least one person would write a long email explaining that she was passionately interested in the environment but something more important had come up that day. Of the remaining volunteers, most of us wouldn't know how to use a lopper, let alone a chainsaw. We'd talk at great length as we leaned against shovels and rakes, however, about the importance of having people get their hands dirty in nature. We'd have a lively discussion about how the parks department could better manage the property. And several of us would leave early because we had dinner reservations.

The Lutherans, meanwhile, would be starting on an extra set of tasks because they had all these hands and they may as well make the

most of their time and are you sure we couldn't pull some of that invasive garlic mustard as long as we're here?

I was thoroughly Episcopalian in my preference for discussions instead of physical labor, but the contrast got me thinking.

Martin and Me, Reluctantly Reunited

It took a trip to Germany to help me fully understand what I'd experienced in my hometown all those years ago—and teach me how visits to holy sites can help us make sense of our personal histories in unexpected ways.

I wasn't particularly excited about touring Martin Luther sites in the former East Germany, but it was an option at a travel writing conference I attended, and as someone who specializes in spiritual tourism, I felt obliged to sign up. Filling out the online form, I reluctantly passed over the boxes for a cruise on the Danube, a hiking trek through Bavaria, and three days at Munich's Oktoberfest, instead checking "Martin Luther History" with a sigh.

When I arrived in Germany, however, I resolved to make the best of it. Our trip began in Wittenberg, the city most identified with Martin Luther and Reformation history. A guide dressed in the full-length skirt, hat, and cape of a sixteenth-century hausfrau met our small group of writers in the historic town center and gave us an overview of Luther's time in her city. Luther lived here for nearly 35 years, she said, first earning a doctorate in theology and then serving as a professor of Bible studies at the University of Wittenberg. She told us the story of how after he left the Roman Catholic Church he married Katharina von Bora, a former nun who'd escaped from her convent in an empty fish barrel and who was as strong-minded and formidable as her husband.

I was surprised to hear it was a happy union, for Martin Luther never struck me as good husband material, what with all his railing against corruption and preoccupation with sin, not to mention his notorious intestinal gas. But I learned that Luther loved his energetic, intelligent wife, referring to her as "my kind and dear lord and master, Katy, Lutheress, doctoress, and priestess of Wittenberg."

Our tour of Wittenberg continued, leading us to the house where the Luthers lived, now the world's largest museum of Reformation history, and St. Mary's Town Church, which is famous for its Reformation-era altar created by artist Lucas Cranach the Elder in 1547. We spent an entertaining hour in a print shop furnished as it would have been in Luther's day, its interior redolent with the sharp, chemical smell of ink. An artisan wearing a leather apron and period dress helped us print a sample page of a pamphlet, explaining how Wittenberg had been a center for publishing in the sixteenth century, which helped Luther's ideas spread quickly throughout Europe.

At last we came to the Castle Church, the site of the most famous bulletin board announcement in history. Our guide explained that in Luther's day, this church was the chapel for the university, and its side door functioned as a message board for church and school notices. Tradition says that on October 31, 1517, Luther walked up to that door and nailed on it a document, the 95 Theses, calling for reform in the Roman Catholic Church—an act that is credited with igniting the Protestant Reformation.

Though a fire destroyed the original door in 1760, a black bronze door now marks its location. Today pilgrims come from around the world to this spot. And standing in front of that door, my tepid interest in Martin Luther became genuine curiosity. Luther changed from the bronze statue I remembered from the Luther College campus—portly, stiff, and dull—into a living man.

Over the next three days, my interest grew as we followed the Martin Luther trail to Eisleben, the city of both his birth and death, and Erfurt, where he lived as a young man. As I traipsed from one historic site to another, I enjoyed the intellectual challenge of trying to make sense of the contradictory puzzle pieces of his life. He was a devout monk who became a loving husband, a committed Catholic who shattered the unity of the Church he loved, and an intellectual who didn't hesitate to use crude language to get his points across (for examples, see the online "Martin Luther Insult Generator").

Luther was the son of a miner who had become a prosperous copper smelter, a father who hoped his intelligent eldest son would raise the family's social standing by becoming a lawyer. Luther was a dutiful son and began his legal studies at the University of Erfurt. But on a summer night in 1505 he got caught in a terrible thunderstorm. Fearful for his life, he vowed to St. Anna that if he survived he would become a monk. When the danger passed, Luther kept his word by joining an Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, provoking the fury of his father.

In the monastery, Luther out-monked even the most zealous of his brothers. He was determined to save his soul through rigid discipline and penitence.

In 1511 he went to Rome. This wasn't a good year for idealistic monks to visit the Holy City, as the Church was in the middle of building St. Peter's Basilica and needed to raise a lot of money, fast. The selling of indulgences—which were said to release a soul from purgatory—was the primary means of filling the coffers. Luther was also appalled by the power, wealth, and corruption of the church hierarchy.

Returning to Germany, Luther struggled as well with the role of the Church in salvation, finally finding his answer in Paul's *Letter to the Romans* in the New Testament. Through Paul's words he came to believe that we are justified by faith, not works. No one

can reach heaven through individual merit, because God alone can save sinners.

Luther launched a campaign to reform the Roman Catholic Church, which included nailing the theses on the church door in Wittenberg. He didn't intend to start a new branch of Christianity, but when the bishops and Pope Leo X opposed him, he turned on his former superiors with vehemence. After the pope threatened to excommunicate him if he didn't recant, Luther publicly burned the paper on which the threat was written, an in-your-face act not unlike young men burning their draft cards during the Vietnam War. The pope carried through on his threat, declaring Luther a pariah banned from participating in any Christian sacraments, thus putting his soul at risk of eternal damnation.

Then came Luther's finest moment. It took place in the German town of Worms at an assembly known as the Diet of Worms (a name that has delighted many generations of Lutheran children).

Any of us would be lucky to get something like this on our spiritual resumes, as it was quite riveting. Luther was brought before Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, to defend himself. Charles gave Luther the chance to renounce what he had preached and published. Luther stood up and said: "I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."

This statement, I had to admit, took *cojones* (an analogy that Luther probably would have liked). Luther affirmed the right of each person to claim a direct relationship with God. He stood up bravely to corruption and the threat of violence. He claimed the primacy of individual conscience over ecclesiastical hierarchy. It made me proud to be born a Lutheran, something I hadn't felt in many years.

Our last stop was Wartburg Castle, where Luther went into hiding after his act of defiance at the tribunal. A German prince who supported Luther's efforts for reform brought him to this fortress overlooking the

town of Eisenach. Because there was a reward offered for his capture, Luther took off his monk's robe, grew a beard and long hair, and lived under an assumed name during his ten-month stay at the castle.

Our tour wound through the building's grand halls and richly ornamented public spaces. But its most famous room is much simpler and smaller, a space with rough-hewn walls and little furniture. It was here that Luther committed yet another revolutionary act, the translation of the New Testament into German. In its own way, this was even more provocative than his 95 Theses or his refusal to recant before the tribunal, because at that time church authorities strongly discouraged the translation of scripture into vernacular languages. This meant that knowledge of the Bible was largely limited to clergy. Luther, however, believed that all people had the right to read the divine word without ecclesiastical intermediaries.

Through the years I've learned that for me, the iron-clad test of whether I'm in a holy place is if my eyes well with tears. Unexpectedly, that happened in this humble room. For many years I'd disliked Martin Luther—he'd long struck me as grumpy, intolerant, and way too adamant about having me memorize his entire *Small Catechism*. But standing before his desk, I came to appreciate his courage and brilliance. His months of scribbling away in this drafty, chilly room changed the course of history, inspiring generations of Protestant Reformers as well as Johann Sebastian Bach, who tried to express in music what Luther penned in his theological writings. Luther's efforts contributed to the collapse of medieval feudalism and helped lay the foundation for the modern ideals of liberty and freedom of conscience.

Seeing his desk made me think, too, how many of the most powerful writings in history have been composed in prison or during exile, from the biblical book of Revelation written by a persecuted Christian on the island of Patmos to the "Letter from the Birmingham Jail"

written by Luther's namesake, Martin Luther King, Jr. While authorities think that such forced isolation will silence and intimidate rebels, for some it deepens their commitment to justice and hardens their resolve. Alone with their thoughts and with God, countless prisoners of conscience have found their cells to be crucibles that temper and strengthen them.

As I left Luther's room, I saw a long line of people waiting to enter. With their earnest and reverent faces, they had the look of pilgrims, not merely tourists.

It's really quite amazing. One day you're an outlaw fearing for your life. And five centuries later, people from around the world come to pay homage to you in the room where you once sat writing at a desk.

Wayfaring with a Purpose

My time in Germany made me realize the foolishness of letting my childhood experiences define an entire faith. I'd been among the legions of people who think they understand their religious heritage despite studying it haphazardly during years when adolescent hormones bathed their brains and clouded their judgment. This is like thinking we've mastered particle physics because we managed to get a C in beginning algebra in junior high.

Germany also taught me about the power of pilgrimage to explain my past. I could see the direct connections between Luther's history and my own childhood in Iowa. Northern European industriousness helped shaped the work ethic of my small town. Even after centuries, Luther's persecution by the established church fueled the peculiar attitudes many Lutherans had towards Catholicism in my youth. And Luther's emphasis on the importance of an individual's relationship with God meant there was often more than a hint of Germanic angst

in the air. You couldn't ride on anyone's coattails to heaven. Religion is serious stuff, and if you get it wrong you'll pay the price for eternity.

I probably didn't need to go all the way to Germany to learn these truths. But being right there where Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the church door and where he'd translated the New Testament made me understand these things in a way that I hadn't before.

But I must admit that in the end, my trip also confirmed for me why I'm no longer a Lutheran.

On my last day in Wittenberg, I attended a late afternoon, English-language service in a small stone chapel next to the Town Church. The liturgy was lovely, with a rousing rendition of the most famous Lutheran hymn of all, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." The song took me back to sitting in a pew at our country church and hearing the hymn played on its wheezy organ on Sunday mornings. I thought of my many relatives buried in its cemetery amid the Dahlens, Andersons, Halvorsons, Olsons, Johnsons, and Rosendahls, all of them enjoying the well-deserved eternal rest of Lutherans who've done their duty.

After the service ended, I sat for awhile in the church, alone. I reflected on what my time as a Lutheran had given me: a religious education steeped in the Bible, a no-nonsense, get-'er-done attitude towards volunteer service, and quite a few Bible verses that I still remembered from confirmation class, lo these many years ago. I hadn't ever been captured by the North Vietnamese, but I was still grateful to have them.

But as I sat there, the interior of the church became increasingly chilly and I got colder and colder. And it became a pretty apt metaphor for my relations with the Lutheran Church. This denomination is admirable. It is strong. If civilized society collapses in some sort of apocalyptic firestorm, I'm going to ditch the Episcopalians and try to find a band of roaming Lutherans, who will have re-created a fully functional society within 48 hours.

But until that day, I knew that Lutheranism would never be my faith again. For me it was too tied to ethnic identity, too steeped in a small town ethos, and too intertwined with memories of growing up. Some people find the faith of their childhood to be their anchor as adults, but that wasn't the case for me, even after I'd made my peace with Martin Luther.

By the time I left that little church, I was chilled to the bone.