

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"
Psalm 46

30 October Anno Domini 1994
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church of Emmett, Idaho
Pastor Michael L. McCoy

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, today the sermon for this Reformation Sunday is based upon Psalm 46 which is also the basis for Hymn #262. Lutherans have always held the singing of hymns and the proclamation of the Word in the sermons in high regard. When the two are combined, as will be the case this morning, it becomes a truly festival day. It would not be appropriate to preach on hymns that glorify the subjective feelings of the writer rather than the saving acts of God. For example, an appropriate hymn for preaching on is "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," while an inappropriate song would be I Have Decided to Follow Jesus.

What distinguishes Lutheran hymn writers is that their hymns are scriptural and in theological agreement with the central message of all scriptures -- "Salvation by the grace of God alone through faith alone in Christ alone as revealed to us in the Bible alone." In addition, Lutherans who write sermons and hymns are concerned with properly distinguishing Law and Gospel.

This is particularly true of the hymn, A Mighty Fortress Is Our God. This is the Battle Hymn of the Reformation. If you look at the upper left corner, you will note that Martin Luther wrote the hymn in 1529 and based it upon Psalm 46. It was probably written for the Diet of Spires which convened on April 20, 1529. It was here that the reformers received the name, protestant. They protested -- they testified for the Gospel.

This morning, the sermon is based on Psalm 46 and Hymn #262 will serve as the outline. Please listen to that psalm and rejoice in the truth that ...

... A Mighty Fortress is Our God!

God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. There is a river whose streams make glad the City of God, the Holy Habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God will help her right early. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our Refuge. Come, behold the works of the LORD, how He has wrought desolations in the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, He burns the chariots with fire! "Be still, and know that I am God. I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth!" The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our Refuge.

That is the Word of the LORD our God.

Psalm 46, written under the inspiration of God, tells us of a miraculous victory of the children of Israel during the days when King Jehoshaphat was on the throne of David. Briefly, the

circumstances surrounding this psalm were this. The nomadic tribes of the Moabites, Ammonites, and Edomites were gathered together in siege against the children of Israel. And to say the least, things looked very dismal for the children of Israel. In fact, only a miracle of God could save them, and they knew it. So Jehoshaphat turned to the LORD. God responded through his prophet Jahaziel, Do not be afraid or discouraged ... the battle is not yours, but God's.

The armies of Moab and Ammon and Seir were filled with confusion and began to fight with one another. The battle was fierce and the outcome was devastating. They ended up literally destroying one another. And when the morning hours arrived and the children of Israel saw what had happened, they immediately knew that this victory was not theirs, but God's.

Moved by the Spirit of God, the sons of Korah, hymnists of the children of Israel, penned this 46th psalm -- a psalm which says, God is our Refuge and Strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea ... The LORD Almighty is with us ... Come and see the works of the LORD .. Be still and know that I am God.

Luther recognized the close parallel between what he saw in the lives of the children of Israel and what he saw in his own life and the unfolding of the Reformation. He picked up the emphasis of this psalm in his life and for the life of every other Christian. Look at that first stanza.

A mighty Fortress is our God, A trusty Shield and Weapon;
He helps us free from every need, That hath us now o'ertaken.
The old evil Foe, Now means deadly woe; Deep guile and great might
Are his dread arms in fight; On earth is not his equal.

If we were to put that stanza into other words, it might be something like this. Don't you ever forget that your God is a mighty, saving God. Yes, the LORD is truly and always will be the believer's Refuge and Strength. Whenever you think things are getting a little tough -- or, a whole lot tough -- whenever questions begin to arise in your mind as to whether God really is aware of you and your problems -- remember that yours is a God about Whom we can boldly say: God is our Refuge and Strength. Yes, a mighty Fortress is our God. He has freed us from every bondage which wants to bind us for eternity. He was in the times when Psalm 46 was written. He was in the days when Luther wrote the hymn. He is today in your life. And He will ever be such a God to the ends of time and beyond. Yes, God truly is our Refuge and our Strength.

If He is not your God, then you must contend with Satan all by yourself -- you must do battle with that old evil Foe who uses his immense power and deep guile and subtle trickery to own you. And he will use both his power and deception as the one-two punch of his dreadful arms to own you. No human being on this earth -- you, me, the wisest woman, the strongest man, the youngest baby, the oldest person is equal to the task of fighting and prevailing against the old evil Foe. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness. The second stanza begins with a reaffirmation of this truth.

With might of ours can naught be done. Soon were our loss effected;
But for us fights the Valiant One, Whom God Himself elected.
Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is, Of Sabaoth LORD,

And there's none other God; He holds the field forever.

Imagine being the children of Israel surrounded by three armies and your defeat was imminent and impending doom and destruction were but hours and minutes away. Oh, dear God, we are lost. You are our only hope. The hymn was truly written out of the heart of Luther. Before Luther came to an understanding of what the Gospel was, he was lost. Writing to a friend, he wrote the statement: "I daily find myself approaching closer and still closer to hell." And he signed this letter, "an exiled son of Adam." But then, with all thanks and glory to God, he came to understand and learn that he could not earn peace and forgiveness from God, but that peace and forgiveness have already been earned for us through the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation is a free gift from God to all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Like Luther, we are no unaware of our sins and transgressions before God. We know that we daily sin much, and indeed deserve nothing but God's wrath and damnation. We also know that if God were to deal with us according to His justice, there would be but one thing that He would have to say to us. It would be the words, Depart from Me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. But thanks be to God you and I have also come to know a God Who not only sent His Son into this world to keep the Law perfectly in our place, but Who then went to the cross and rose victorious for your sins, mine, and the sins of all mankind. Truly, God is our Refuge and Strength.

Still, after becoming a Christian, there were moments in Luther's life when he felt something very nearly like despair. Under the sentence of death, as had been the sentence carried out on John Hus earlier, and under the spiritual assaults of the old evil Foe, Luther had no where to turn but to the LORD. With might of our, absolutely nothing can be done to defeat our enemies. Soon would be our demise, our downfall, and our destruction.

Oh children of Israel, there is a Valiant One Who has stepped out into the battlefield for us. Do you not see Him -- this Champion come to wage war and fight on our behalf? We would never have chosen Him. This little Baby in a manger in Bethlehem. This Man from Galilee Who comes armed with and as the Word of God. Why, this is the One Whom God has elected to fight the battle in our place and stand in our stead. Do you ask, "Who is this?" Jesus the Christ -- the Messiah -- it is. This is the LORD of the Sabbath rest. This is the Incarnate Word Who did His creating work in six days and ceased from His labors on the Sabbath. And this is the truth no matter who denies it. The third stanza:

Though devils all the world should fill, All eager to devour us.
We tremble not, we fear no ill, They shall not overpower us.
This world's prince may still, Scowl fierce as he will, He can harm us none,
He's judged; the deed is done; One little word can fell him.

The forces of evil still do a great deal of damage. The psalmist declares that the nations rage, the kingdoms totter. There are wars -- some physical and some spiritual which are being carried out today. Early in the Reformation, Luther was summoned to a the city of Worms, there to defend his faith and the truth of God's Word. He was advised by both friends and associates not to go. They were convinced that if he went, he would be put to death. His reply was, "Even if there are more devils on the rooftops than the clay shingles, I will still go to Worms and defend the truth of God's Word."

Such confidence does not come from individual strength within, but from conviction that the LORD is leading one's life even if it means death. The devil's purposes are thwarted by one little word. What is that Word? It is no secret and it is not magic. It is the Name of the LORD -- the Name of the Triune God. Into His Name you were baptized. It is the Name which is above every name, that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is LORD.

One little word can refute the devil and all his works and all his ways. One little word takes you from the kingdom of darkness and transfers you to the kingdom of God. That Word was heard from the cross. We have to translate it into three words, but in the Greek, it is one word -- telestai. It is finished! Spoken by Jesus as He died for us and defeated Satan for us, it is finished, tells us the Good News of salvation being ours. In the darkness of the cross and in the silence of that awe-filled empty tomb, come, behold the works of the LORD. He says, Be still, and know that I am God. I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth! The fourth stanza:

The Word they still shall let remain, Nor any thanks have for it.
He's by our side upon the plain, With His good gifts and Spirit.
And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife, Let these all be gone,
They yet have nothing won; The Kingdom ours remaineth.

Please imagine the following scene and pray that you never have to go through it. Imagine that you are a parent, sitting in the upper room of your home in Wittenberg. In your arms is your dying daughter, a young girl named Magdalena -- your little girl you love so much. He said with tears flowing from his eyes, "Oh, how it hurts to lose my little Maggie. But God wants her and she is his. Therefore I release her into the hands of a gracious and loving God."

Perhaps you get a sense of the agony and the victory behind the words in the stanza, And take they our life, goods, fame, son, daughter, husband, wife, if these are even all gone, yet the forces of evil have not won. The Kingdom remains mine.

Like Luther, I am sure your life has not been free from the troubles and trials which so frequently bring tears to our eyes and sorrow to our hearts. Perhaps it has come in the form of illness, family troubles, financial woes. Perhaps you too, have had to stand at the death bed of a daughter or son, a wife or husband, feeling the burdens of life as only these can weigh down upon us. But in such times as then, and in the days and years which follow, the forces have not conquered you.

Turning to the end of Luther's life, we find him going to Eisleben to mediate a dispute that had arisen between two princes. The trip was difficult. Luther was not well. But once again, he went -- working to the very end. We are told of the severe chest pains he had, and he knew the end was approaching. We are told of his standing at the window and praying, "The pain is so severe, God, but I am ready to come home to you, Father." And shortly before his death, when he was asked, "Brother Martin, are you willing to die in that faith which you have proclaimed?" Luther said with much gusto, "Yes, yes." A little later he fell asleep in the LORD -- into the hands of the God Who is our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear.

Also, you know that the day will come -- maybe sooner, maybe later, but it will certainly come -- when you will cross the threshold of death and face your God and Creator at the conclusion of your life. Maybe six months from now -- maybe six years or sixty. But thanks be to God that you also

have come to know and believe in a Savior Who has said, I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, it is to the task of keeping the faith and proclaiming it that each and every one of us assembled here at this Reformation service has been called. Whether you are a woman or a man, young or old, blue collar worker or professional, God did not entrust this glorious truth to us in order that we might sit on it. Pray that God would give you renewed determination to spread as far and wide as possible the knowledge of this God, and that He is a Mighty Fortress. Spread that Word until, like thousands of other believers who have gone before, we too finally join the great throng of believers gathered before the throne of the Lamb.

There is no other God than the LORD God -- Father, Son, Holy Spirit. There is no other Savior than this Jesus, our Redeemer. He stands by us upon the plain and He holds the field forever. Do you not see Him? Look through the eyes of John the Apostle:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He Who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and He has a name inscribed which no one knows but Himself. He is clad in a robe dipped in Blood, and the Name by which He is called is The Word of God. ... On His robe and on His thigh He has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords.

Amen.

A Mighty Fortress is our God, a trusty Shield and Weapon; He helps us free from every need that hath us now o'ertaken.

Amen.