

“A Mighty Fortress”-Reformation Sermon 2020

“A Mighty Fortress is our God, A trusty shield and weapon; he helps us free from every need, that hath us now overtaken.” They are words we all hopefully recognize as Lutherans. They are the words of what we call the Battle Hymn of the Reformation, “A Mighty Fortress is our God” written by Martin Luther. Words inspired by a particular Psalm.

Psalm 46, and boy, is that a Psalm we need to hear today, just like it was a Psalm Luther needed to hear in his day. For it is in the times that seem most difficult, we need to hear those words of Psalm 46. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

For in those words are the most beautiful of pictures for us. First of all, God is our refuge. The word refuge means a place to hide, a place to be protected. It is a Hebrew word often used with the image of a hen shielding her chicks under her wings for protection from storm and foe. I am sure we all had our places when we were growing up that we went to hide when times got scary. The Lord is reminding us He is that place, the place to run for shelter when fears overtake us.

However has the Lord been the first place you have been running to these last few months? I read these Scriptures and it convinces me it has to be the first place. We can hide behind the shelter of the four walls of our homes. We can hide behind the hope of a vaccine. We can hide behind the premise that we can be our own shelter. However, there is one thing I fear more, and ought to be the consideration of all of us. What does the Lord think of all this.

For I guarantee you, Satan is having a field day with this time. He has people fearing church. He has people fearing others. He has people angry and bitter and turning on each other over the challenges of this time. At the Pastor’s Conference last week, there was a pastor who was telling me after his church opened up after the shut down, he had these parishioners after taking communion one Sunday turned around and started pointing at all the people who did not have masks on in the service, as if to shame them. Satan is having a field day.

It is not unlike Martin Luther’s day. In 1527, the Black Plague hit Wittenberg. Luther was encouraged to leave Wittenberg along with his family because it was what people were encouraged to do in those days when the plague hit their town. However, Luther stayed when many left. He stayed because he could not bear to think of people sick and dying without spiritual care. His family stayed too.

They brought sick people into the cloister, the parish house in Wittenburg, and he ministered to and cared for the sick. He prayed over them and tended to

them. The days were long and the stress and grief were heavy. His little Hans got seriously sick while he was there and he held some friends in his arms as they died from the plague.

However, for Luther, the fear of him not staying and doing his duty as a bearer of Christ's word and hope was greater. He sought the Lord's will above his own, even though he admitted at that time being terrified for his wife who was pregnant.

What carried Luther through that time was the Word of God and the promises found in it. Like that promise, that the Lord is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. He clung to those words in those days knowing each day he woke up tending to the sick that he was putting his life at risk, but He did it because He couldn't bear to think of someone dying without the comfort of the Gospel, without the opportunity for them to receive forgiveness for their sins in Christ and the peace that in Christ's forgiveness, they could die with an unburdened, saved soul.

He lived to assure them of the good news that their sins had been placed upon Christ and Christ's life of perfection and holiness had been transferred to them. He lived to share with them the promise of resurrection in Christ, that they could be set free from their bodies of sin, their bondage to its effects and live as those made free in Christ.

The freedom Jesus talks about in our Gospel when he says, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free in indeed." Jesus has to be our foremost place of refuge because only in Him can death be faced without fear. It is why Jesus told Jairus, whose daughter had died, "Do not fear, only believe.", as Jesus was speaking confidence into his heart that He could raise his daughter and give her victory over death.

It is why Jesus said to his disciples when they were in the boat afraid for their lives when they were caught in the storm, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith." Luther knew these words and knew people needed to hear them to face their illness and death with confidence in Christ and his grace. Christ was their release from their sins and the refuge that promised them life everlasting. Luther knew that truth was the most important thing for those people in the midst of the pandemic of his time, so he stayed.

It was when all that He had gone through to defend the Gospel, the truth of God's full and free forgiveness offered through Christ to all, mattered the most. If this wasn't proclaimed and spoken into the hearts of those who were literally dying, it betrayed the whole reason for his stand.

Therefore, he proclaimed it and showed it in love at the risk of his life, and by God's grace, he and his wife survived, as well as his son.

But in those long days, like ours, He knew there was one place to turn in the midst of His fears to Christ and his Word and it is where it has to be the first place for us to turn as well, to show the world as Christ's church that we believe these words we confess. If there is ever a time when the world needs to see that through us, it is now.

And I know that comes with fears, but we are called to face those fears with faith, knowing we have promises from Christ and His Word to spur us on in our walk.

Much like, I am sure Luther had many a day when he poured over those next words of Psalm 46, **“Therefore, we will not fear though the earth give way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.”**

It is when everything seems to be crumbling around us. When there seems no place to hide as the mountains tremble and fall, there is always one. Our Lord.

It is what the Psalmist clung too as he drew his strength from the knowledge his city Jerusalem, the city of God referred to in v. 4, had God in its midst. Therefore, she would not be moved. He was confident that God would help her when the morning dawned. And many times, when it was God's will, he rescued his people in the city from siege and tumult. That while the nations raged against them, the Lord was with them. He was their fortress.

Our Lord invites us in His word to look at Him that same way. As our fortress; our refuge. To run to Him as our shelter against the enemies of this life, including this virus, but running to him knowing that even if we were to get it as Satan has done his worst in the world, it is the peace of the Gospel that is our real refuge and strength.

It is the hope found in Christ because Christ is the refuge of the soul. Our earthly bodies will all one day sleep in death through virus or accident or old age, but when the soul takes refuge in Christ, laying hold of the promises of Christ in his Word, clinging to Him in the midst of the fears of death, we can in the words of Psalm 46, “Be Still.” Be still in the knowledge that Christ is God. Be still in the knowledge that He is with us. He is our Fortress. Satan and death have no hold over us in Him.

It is why Luther wrote, knowing that truth, “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 word of Christ, the Gospel fells Satan and our heritage as Lutherans on this Reformation day is to proclaim this to our world with all fervor and faith knowing there are people dying among us. For in this time when Satan is scowling

and howling, filling our world with fear and distrust, we have the word that can fell Him. We have the Word of Christ and know that Word will also prevail in Your life. Cling to it. Put your trust in it. Find your refuge in it and it will be Your strength through this and every time. It certainly was for Luther as it was that word of Psalm 46 and his knowledge and faith in Christ that led him to write those words of “A Mighty Fortress” after the tribulation of those days of the plague.

He knew our victory has been won in Christ. The kingdom ours remaineth.
Amen.