

A Sermon from Psalm 46

For Reformation-Day Sunday, 2018

by Pastor Ronald K. Hodel

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In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

This Reformation-Day Sunday I'd like you to consider Psalm 46, which is also the basis for the hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. Lutherans have always held in high regard both the singing of hymns and the proclamation of the Word in sermons. Whatever we do, we do it theologically. Our liturgy is packed full of theology and so are our hymns.

Take, for instance, the Paul Speratus hymn, written in 1523, *Salvation Unto Us Has Come*. If you were born on a deserted island and never saw a Bible, with this one hymn you would learn all you need for faith and trust in Christ. It would take ten stanzas to get you to that point, but it *would* get you there. Sure, some of our hymns might be hard to sing (no—some of our hymns are *impossible* to sing), but when you've sung them, you've really sung it all.

Our hymnal conveniently notes the Bible passages that moved the hymn writers to write their words. They teach us something about the faith of the person who took pen in hand and started writing the hymn. Martin Luther wrote *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* in 1529 and based it upon Psalm 46. It was probably written to be sung during the Diet of Spires. The Diet of Spires wasn't a city-wide weight-reduction program. No, the Diet of Spires was a church convention which began on March 15, 1529 in the city of Spires (in the southwestern corner of present-day Germany). The Pope's (and Emperor's) representatives aimed to rein in and ultimately stop the Reformation. But the Lutheran reformers protested—formally—and it was at this Diet that they were first called "protestant." They were recognized as protesters—protesting *against* all those measures of the Diet which they saw as contrary to the Word of God—protesting *for* the Gospel.

Listen now to Psalm 46 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 gives 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. *Selah*

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 when morning dawns.
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 fortress. *Selah*

Come, behold the works of the LORD,
how He has brought desolations on 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 will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!”
The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

Psalm 46 doesn't have a date on it, but it could be referring to the miraculous victory the children of Israel experienced during the days when King Hezekiah was on the throne of David in Jerusalem. If you recall (and even if you don't), the mighty Assyrian army was on the march. No country, regardless of strength, was able to stop them. Country after country fell to their vicious ways of war. Captive after captive was led away, fishhooks through their noses, all strung together on long lines of Assyrian fishing wire.

As the king of Assyria approached Israel, he wrote to King Hezekiah,

Don't let your God in whom you trust deceive you saying, 'Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.' You've heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the lands, destroying them completely. So will you be spared? Did the gods of those nations, which my fathers have destroyed, deliver them?

And, of course the answer was no. Utter fear filled the land. Honestly, things couldn't have looked more dismal for God's people.

One thing you need to know about Hezekiah is that he was “good king Hezekiah.” And good king Hezekiah turned to the LORD. On the floor of the temple he spread the letter Sennacherib, king of Assyria, had sent him, and he prayed:

O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, who is enthroned above the cherubim, You are the God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth.

Incline Your ear, O LORD, and hear; open Your eyes, O LORD, and see; and listen to all the words of Sennacherib, who sent them to reproach the living God. Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have devastated all the countries and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. So they have destroyed them. Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, LORD, are God.

Things couldn't have looked worse and everyone knew it. And perhaps, so do we. Like all Jerusalem, we often have to find ourselves at the very bottom—totally helpless, hopeless and with no place to turn—before we realize just how lost we really are and just how hopeless our situation really is. And by situation I don't mean what's going on in the economy, or that life is hard and bound to get harder. No, by situation I mean our spiritual state. We have to come to that point (in fact, God has to bring us to the point) where we believe—where we know—that because of our sin and our self-centered ways, the holy and perfect Law of God actually damns us to hell.

If you haven't hit that bottom,
if Christianity is just a bunch of pious holiday sentimentality,
if church is just one of those good old boys (or girls) clubs,
if you go just because your parents go,
if what's most important is the budget and the buildings and the business of numbers,
if the Law looks more like your friend than your accuser,
if it's God's job to give you the best life now,

then you're not where the people of God—the children of Israel—had found themselves.

There was no way the Assyrian army could lose—absolutely no way—and all Judah knew it. No way they could lose, except that God said to Hezekiah through Isaiah the prophet, "I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David's sake." Then it happened that night that the angel of the LORD went out and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; 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, the hymn writers of the children of Israel, penned the 46th psalm: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea ... The LORD of hosts is with us ... Come, behold the works of the LORD ... Be still, and know that I am God."

Luther recognized the parallel between what he saw in the lives of the children of Israel and what he saw in his own life as the Reformation unfolded. But he also picked up the emphasis of this psalm for the life of every other Christian. Look at that first stanza. Oh, and yes, there are a number of translations of *A Mighty Fortress*—I'm going to use the composite translation found in the Lutheran Service Book, page 656:

A mighty fortress is our God,
A trusty shield and weapon;
He helps us free from ev'ry 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 ever forget that your God is a mighty, saving God.
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 and indeed a mighty fortress.
He has freed us from every bondage that wants to bind us for eternity.

If He's not your God, then you must contend with Satan all by yourself—then you, and you alone, must do battle with the old evil foe. And the old evil foe hardly has to try when up against the likes of you, but he will use all his power and deception—his dreadful arms to own you. And know this: on earth is not his equal. As St. Peter said, "We're 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."

And Luther's second stanza begins with a reaffirmation of that fact:

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 the mighty Assyrian army; your defeat is imminent, your doom mere hours away. Before Luther came to an understanding of what the Gospel was, he was in that situation. Spiritually, he was completely lost. Writing to a friend, he said, “I daily find myself approaching closer and still closer to hell.” And he signed his letter, “an exiled son of Adam.” But then, all thanks to God, Luther came to understand that although he couldn’t earn peace and forgiveness from God, that peace and forgiveness had already been earned, bought and won for him—through the life, suffering, death, and physical, bodily resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Like Luther, we too know that we daily sin much, and deserve nothing but God’s wrath. And it’s not just that we sin, it’s that there’s a part of us that *loves* to sin. It’s what the old reformers called concupiscence (it almost sounds like a dirty word, doesn’t it?). We sin and we rather thrive on it. Think I’m kidding? Then stop gossiping. Try stopping that self-destructive behavior ... and don’t just replace it with another one. Try to put the best construction on everything—especially when it comes to those with whom you disagree. Imagine telling yourself every day, “the world doesn’t revolve around me.” Yes, we like to sin and we rather thrive on it. There are times we’ll even boast of it.

But we also know that if God were to deal with us according to His justice, there would be but one thing He would have to say to us: “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 come to know a God who not only sent His Son into this world to keep the Law perfectly in our place, but who also went to the cross for our disobedience and rose victorious—covering your sins, my sins, and the sins of all humankind with His holy precious blood. Truly, God is our Refuge and Strength.

Still, for Luther, even after coming to faith, there were moments when he felt despair, maybe like you feel sometimes even as a Christian. The year 1521 was especially hard. That’s when Emperor Charles V had placed him under the sentence of death—though he avoided that by hiding. But the old evil foe continued to assault him spiritually, and from that he could not escape.

Luther had nowhere to turn but to the LORD. With our puny “might” nothing can be done to defeat our enemies ... in part because the old evil foe is too strong for us, and in other part because we have met the enemy—and he is us. “Soon were our loss effected.”

But there is a Valiant One who has stepped out onto the battlefield for us; a Champion who has come to wage war and fight on our behalf. But He doesn’t look like a champion, and based on looks, we would never have chosen Him. Think about it—would you have chosen for your champion:

- A little Baby in a manger in Bethlehem wrapped in a diaper?
- A man from Galilee? (“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”)
- Who comes armed only with words?

Remember the line out of the first Star Wars movie? “Hokey religions and ancient weapons are no match for a good blaster at your side, kid.” Han Solo said it, and the world agrees.

“Who is this?” ... the One God has elected to fight the battle in our place and stand in our stead?

“Who is this?” It’s Jesus, the Christ—the Messiah, of Sabaoth Lord. That’s not Sabbath Lord—Sabaoth means the LORD of the heavenly armies.

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 lot of damage. All you need to do is turn on the news, or walk out on the streets, to see that the psalmist is right. There are no safe havens on this earth. Not stocks, not housing, not even gold. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter. There are wars—sometimes physical, sometimes economic and always spiritual. And in all of it, make no mistake: Satan seeks your life. He doesn’t care much about your physical ruin or your economic ruin ... or your success for that matter ... so long as he gets your life.

Early in the Reformation, Luther was summoned to the city of Worms in Western Germany to defend his faith and the truth of God’s Word. His best friends told him 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.”

That kind of bold confidence didn’t come from within Luther. Luther didn’t dig down deep inside his heart and come up with confidence. It came from outside of him, from the promises of God found in the Scriptures, in places like Psalm 46. That’s what formed Luther’s conviction that the LORD was leading his life—even if it meant He was leading Luther straight to death. And that’s where our convictions come from, too. And convicted we can be, if we trust that the devil’s purposes are thwarted by one little word.

And what’s that Word? It’s not a secret word. It’s not a magic incantation. It’s *the Word* that became flesh. It’s the Name into which you were baptized, the name into which my grandson Emmett was baptized this morning. In Him, as St. Paul says, you are hid, safe with Christ in God. It’s the Name that is above every name, “so 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, to the glory of God the Father.”

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 one little word was spoken by *the Word* from the cross. In English we need three words to translate it, but in Greek, it is one word:

τετέλεσται (*tetelestai*). It is finished! Sin is paid for! The devil is defeated! Satan's accusations won't hold up! Salvation unto us has come! So, dear Christians, one and all, rejoice!

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,
Though these all be gone,
Our vict'ry has been won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.

Imagine the following scene and pray that you never have to go through it, although I know that a number of you already have. So please, let this be a comfort to you. Imagine that you are a parent, sitting in the upper room of your home in Wittenberg. In your arms is your daughter. She's 12, her name is Magdalena, and she's dying ... she's dying in your loving, helpless arms. Your little girl you love so much. With tears flowing from his eyes Luther cried, "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."

Maybe you get a sense of the agony—but also the victory behind the words in the stanza,

And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Though these all be gone,
Our vict'ry has been won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.

Like Luther's, I know our lives haven't been free from the troubles that keep us awake at night. Maybe it comes in the form of illness, family troubles, or financial woes. Maybe you've had to stand at the death bed of someone you love. Maybe it's just that life has ganged up on you and is beating you senseless.

Even in times like these, the forces of death haven't won. It looks like they've won. There's nothing like a cemetery to remind you of that, of course ... but the Gospel says death doesn't get the last word—Jesus does.

Luther went to Eisleben, the town where he was born and baptized, to mediate a dispute between two Christian princes. The trip was difficult. Luther wasn't well. We're told he had sharp chest pains. He knew he was dying.

Shortly before he died, he was asked, “Brother Martin, are you willing to die in that faith which you have proclaimed?” Luther spoke up so that all could hear, “Yes, yes.” And a little later he fell asleep—he fell into the hands of the God Who always was and is his Refuge and Strength—and ours too, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear.

That day will come for you and me too—maybe sooner, maybe later, but it will come—when each of us will cross the threshold of death and face our God at the conclusion of our lives. Thanks be to God, we’ve also come to know and believe in a Savior who has said, “I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine.”

There is no other God than the LORD God—Father, Son, Holy Spirit. There is no other Savior than this Jesus, our Redeemer to whom the Spirit of God points us.

And rest assured, He stands by us upon the plain of this life, and He holds the field forever.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.



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