

Oct. 25, 2015 – Psalm 46:1-10 (Epistle: Romans 3:19-28 Gospel: Matthew 11:12-19)

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” has been called “the Battle Hymn of the Reformation”¹. It was most likely written for the Diet of Spires, which opened on March 15, 1529. It was at this meeting that the German princes made a formal protest against the limitation placed on their religious freedom to preach the true Gospel. From this formal complaint, they were given the name “Protestants.”

Martin Luther based this hymn on Psalm 46. In it, he expands upon the theme given in the opening verse: “*God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble*” (v. 1). When Luther would face difficulties and despair, he would say to his faithful coworker Melancthon, “Come, Philip, let us sing the 46th Psalm.” The truths of this Psalm and his musical rendition were a great comfort and encouragement to Martin and have been to many throughout the ages. And they provide great comfort for us as well in all the trials and temptations of this world.

“*God is our refuge and strength.*” He is our shelter from the storms of this life. We can try to withstand them ourselves, but our strength only goes so far. But we don’t have to stand by our own power. The Lord is not only our shelter, but our strength as well. When things seem impossible, God, for whom all things are possible, is there with His almighty power, to protect you and strengthen you.

God is “*a very present help in trouble*”. That is an interesting phrase the original Hebrew. Literally it says, “a help found exceedingly in trouble.” It is when we run into difficulties that we so often “find God.” When things are going well, it can be easy to let God slip into the background and we almost forget about Him. But when difficulties come, we are driven back to Him. He is “*a very present help*” at all times, not just in trouble.

And there may be times of trouble where it seems that we don’t find God. We may wonder, “Where is God? Why He doesn’t do something?” But looking back, we see that He was there all along. We may not have felt His presence at the time, but we see that God used that difficult time for our good, as He promises to do (Romans 8:28). That is not to say that we will always see the reason that God let us go through every trouble, but God uses them to strengthen our faith and draw us closer to Him as our refuge and strength.

Because “*God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble,*” “*therefore we will not fear*” (v. 2). If God is for us, who can be against us (Romans 8:31)? God’s presence is a very good reason to not fear, no matter how great the problem may appear. Listen to the situation the sons of Korah (see superscription) describe here. They will not fear “*even though the earth be removed, And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though its waters roar and be troubled, Though the mountains shake with its swelling*” (vv. 2-3).

When you have gone through a difficult time in your life, or faced some challenges, has anyone ever tried to comfort you with the words: “It isn’t the end of the world”? Perhaps you’ve said that to your children or to a friend. But situation described here, with the earth being removed and the mountains being thrown into the midst of the sea, is, literally, the end of the world. Even in this extreme case you need not fear, because God is with you.

1. *The Handbook to The Lutheran Hymnal*, W. Gustave Polack pg. 192

You can have this confidence because of what God has done for you in Jesus Christ. God did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for you (Romans 8:32). Jesus died on the cross to buy your freedom from sin, to pay the penalty of your sin, and remove the guilt of your sin so that you now belong to God. Through trust in Jesus' work, you are declared righteous before God.

Because Jesus has saved you and given you the adoption as God's child, you do not need to fear the end of the world, or anything before it. Jesus describes His return in these words: "*And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory*" (Luke 21:25-27). Those without Christ will "*say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!'*" (Luke 23:31) because of the coming judgment of the Lord. But to you, because He was judged in your place, Jesus says, "*Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near*" (Luke 21:24).

Psalms 46 tells us that if we have nothing to fear in the final judgment, we have nothing to fear in the ups and downs of our daily life. Since God gave up His Son to redeem you for all eternity, He is here with you now in all that you face – in all the roaring and troubled waters of this world.

As you read the Psalms, you often find a word that is usually not translated: "selah". It is taken over directly from the Hebrew. Its literal meaning is "lift up". The reason it typically isn't translated is because we don't know exactly what it means when it is used in the Psalms. It is mostly a musical term indicating a pause or musical interlude, perhaps like our use of the word "refrain" when we write the words of a song with a repeated chorus.

This word, selah, breaks up Psalm 46 into three sections, or stanzas. The first one reminds us that God is our refuge and strength and our help in trouble. It looks at the tempest in the world and encourages us to seek shelter in God.

The second stanza moves "inside", so to speak, and describes the shelter that God provides for us in the midst of the storms of life: "*There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, The holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, just at the break of dawn*" (vv. 4-5).

This "*city of God, the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High*" is the church. Don't think of a building, or a visible organization. That is not what God is talking about here. His church is all believers in Christ, who "*as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house*" (1 Peter 2:5). 1 Corinthians 3:16 asks, "*Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?*" – the "you" in this verse is plural; it refers to all the believers. The Church is properly all believers in Christ who gather around God's word and sacraments.

The "*river whose streams shall make glad the city of God*" is Holy Spirit who gives us the joy of God's salvation (Psalm 51:12) through God's word. Jesus said, "*If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water*" (John 7:37-38). And we are told that "*this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive*" (John 7:39).

"*God is in the midst of her*" – His church, His believers – so "*She shall not be moved*" (v. 5). Jesus said, "*For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them*" (Matthew 18:20). The Lord is among us, therefore we shall not fear. The gates of hell shall not prevail against us, His church (Matthew 16:18).

“*God shall help her, just at the break of dawn*” (v. 5). We may see the church harassed and oppressed, as it was in the days of Martin Luther. We may go through what seems to be a long, dark night, but the God will deliver His people “*just at the break of dawn.*”

Verse 6 gives us a glimpse “back outside” or perhaps reminds us of the reason we have sought shelter in our God: “*The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved*” but God, “*He uttered His voice, the earth melted.*”

This stanza ends, as does the third, by reminding us that “*The LORD of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our refuge.*” The word translated “refuge” here is actually a different word than the word used in verse 1. The word there focussed on God being a place of refuge or shelter. The word here (and verse 11) refers a fortress that is high on a hill or mountain – a “mighty fortress” set on high ground that provides ample protection from any assault. And that is what God is – a refuge and a mighty fortress who delivers us from death, the devil, and our sin.

The word translated “hosts” is *tsebaoth*, which was simply transliterated in stanza two of the hymn: “Of Sabaoth Lord.” The LORD is the LORD of hosts or armies – He is over all the heavenly hosts and indeed over all creation. When God is called “The LORD of hosts”, it reminds us that He is Lord of all. He is all-powerful.

In the hymn Martin Luther correctly identifies Jesus Christ as being “Of Sabaoth Lord.” We see this here in verse 7. Perhaps you will get it better if I read the first part of the verse in Hebrew: “*Yehovah tsevaoth immanu*”, or, to paraphrase in a more familiar way: *immanuel*. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us – the Lord of hosts with us. He is our refuge, our very present help in trouble.

The third and final stanza of this Psalm invites us to “*Come, behold the works of the Lord, Who has made desolations in the earth*” (v. 8). Here we are invited “back outside” to see the aftermath after the tempest has blown over. The Lord “*has made desolations in the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the fire.*” (vv. 8-9).

Don’t we often wish we could see the future? As we gather around God’s word we can! We know how things will end. God wins. Everything will be subject to Jesus, the Lord of Hosts, including the last enemy, death (Hebrews 2:8, 1 Corinthians 15:25-27).

Here we see a picture of the desolation left after a great battle; the weapons have all been broken and burned, the war has ceased. As much as the world talks about peace and encourages us to “wage peace”, this is not something man can achieve. Only God can bring peace, which He did 2000 years ago when the Lord of Host became “God with Us” when He was born in Bethlehem and the angels proclaimed, “*Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!*” (Luke 2:14).

Jesus brought us peace: peace with God and with each other. We still see and hear of wars in the world. Jesus us told us that this would be so until He returns again (see Mark 13:7-8, Mark 24:6-8), but here we see that day when all that will cease and all of God’s enemies will be finally wiped out.

But in reality the battle is already over. God has won. Our fiercest foe, this world’s prince, “can harm us none, he’s judged, the dead is done.” God tells us here: “*Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth*” (v. 10). No matter how far from exalting God the world may seem today, God tell us that He will be exalted.

So do not fear, though the earth be removed and the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea. The LORD of hosts is with you; the God of Jacob is your refuge. He has taken away your sins and given you eternal life and a place in His city. He is your strength and help in trouble. May the Holy Spirit fill you with the joy and peace of His Salvation. Amen.

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