

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God
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2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

¹³But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and so we speak, ¹⁴because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

¹⁶So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

¹For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Psalm 46

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
- ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
- ³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
- ⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
- ⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
- ⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
- ⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.
- ⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
- ⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
- ¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth."
- ¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

This morning we'll get a bit of church history, specifically the history of the Protestant traditions. As you may know, we consider John Calvin the father of Presbyterianism, although what we do here today would horrify him, what with our scandalous cream-colored walls, our stained glass windows, and

our less-than-simple confirmation service. As Dr. Robert Godfrey explains, one of several principles which informed Calvin's approach to worship was "that of simplicity. This meant for Calvin the absence of distractions such as elaborate decoration and rites of human invention. Calvin was opposed to showiness in worship. It should be rather a focusing on God in simplicity."¹ That, however, is neither here nor there but a mere bit of trivia for today.

Before Calvin, there was Martin Luther, the father of all Protestantism, the man whose 95 points of protest, or 95 Theses as they are known, got the attention of the Church, which we today would call Roman Catholic. Back then the Church was merely the church, the one and only, and the word catholic was lower case and meant only universal. It is this same understanding of church that is used in the Apostles' Creed when we profess our faith in the holy catholic church.

"Martin Luther was born on 10 November 1483 in Eisleben. His father was a copper miner. Luther studied at the University of Erfurt and in 1505 decided to join a monastic order, becoming an Augustinian friar. He was ordained in 1507, began teaching at the University of Wittenberg and in 1512 was made a doctor of Theology. In 1510 he visited Rome on behalf of a number of Augustinian monasteries, and was appalled by the corruption he found there. Luther became increasingly angry about the clergy selling 'indulgences' - promised remission from punishments for sin, either for someone still living or for one who had died and was believed to be in purgatory. On 31 October 1517, he published his '95 Theses', attacking papal abuses and the sale of indulgences."²

Such an attack did not go unnoticed. "Luther had come to believe that Christians are saved through faith and not through their own efforts. This turned him against many of the major teachings of the... Church."³ He could not in good conscience retract his 95 Theses and was thus excommunicated from the church he loved so dearly and for whom he wanted the best and truest demonstrations of faith. "He was then summoned to appear at the Diet of Worms, an assembly of the Holy Roman Empire. He refused to recant and Emperor Charles V declared him an outlaw and a heretic."⁴

Of course, he was not alone in believing the church needed to be re-formed and found many supporters and friends. "During times when the Reformation seemed lost, Luther would say to his friend [Philip] Melancthon, 'Let's sing the Forty-sixth Psalm.' 'A Mighty Fortress' draws its inspiration from Psalm 46."⁵ The hymn we focus on today is one of more than thirty-five hymns written by Luther. For him, music was second only to Scripture. "Luther had strong convictions about the use

¹ http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_detail.php?428

² http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/luther_martin.shtml

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ www.christianity.com/ChurchHistory/11629923

and power of sacred music. Once he wrote, ‘I would allow no man to preach or teach God’s people without a proper knowledge of the use and power of sacred song.’”⁶ He was also quoted as writing, “Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. She is a mistress and governess of those human emotions...which control men or more often overwhelm them...Whether you wish to comfort the sad, to subdue frivolity, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate...what more effective means than music could you find?”⁷

This music, this hymn in particular, stands above the rest and was known affectionately as the “Battle Hymn of the Reformation” for the “strength and inspiration [it gave to] even those who were martyred for their convictions.”⁸ The same, of course, can be said of our readings this morning, which dovetail beautifully with the hymn. Psalm 46, as I’ve said, is the one which inspired Martin Luther to write this hymn and 2 Corinthians complements it well.

We begin “A mighty fortress is a God, a bulwark never failing.” First things first, it seems right to tell you what Noah Webster has to say about a bulwark. A bulwark can be “a wall of earth or other material built for defense; ramparts” or “any protection against external danger, injury, or annoyance” or “any person or thing giving strong support or encouragement in time of need, danger, or doubt.”⁹ Psalm 46 begins, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” What comfort this brings. A mighty fortress is our God, who gives strong support or encouragement in time of need, danger, or doubt, and never, ever fails to do so.

Luther continues extolling God’s strength and steadfastness saying, “Our helper He amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.” We share experiences with Luther, the psalmist, and Paul. Luther speaks of a “flood of mortal ills prevailing.” The psalmist describes the flood as the earth changing, the mountains shaking in the heart of the sea, the waters roaring and foaming, and the mountains trembling. Paul, who knew his share of mortal ills, encouraged the church at Corinth, who witnessed the persecution and deaths of its members, in this way: “So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.” Who here has never felt as if they were overcome with a flood of ills, a flood of worries, a flood of anxiety? If you’ve ever had “one of those days,” or one of those weeks, months, or years, you know the flood of which Luther speaks. When it seems to be one thing after another with no light at the end of the tunnel, God is our helper and we should not lose heart for eventually these afflictions will be replaced with glory beyond our imagining. “Hang in there,”

⁶ aswesail.blogspot.com/2008/05/story-behind-hymn-mighty-fortess-is.html

⁷ www.christianty.com/ChurchHistory/11629923

⁸ aswesail.blogspot.com/2008/05/story-behind-hymn-mighty-fortess-is.html

⁹ *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, Second Edition (New York: Random House Reference, 2001)

they say. “Better things are coming,” they say.

Can we make things better on our own? The answer to this is the crux of Luther’s theology. There is nothing, not one thing, we can do to save ourselves. Remember, “Luther had come to believe that Christians are saved through faith and not through their own efforts.”¹⁰ And so he wrote, “Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing.” We turn again to Mr. Webster who teaches that confide can also mean “to have full trust; have faith.”¹¹ Should we have full trust in ourselves, forgetting God or believing ourselves better or even equal to God, any endeavor we undertake with that confidence (see that? confide? confidence?) is misguided. And, even if we should prevail through our own confidence, we ultimately lose - for we have broken from God, turned away instead of toward. Paul says it this way: “...for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” Wins on our own terms are temporary; wins on God’s terms are forever.

Lest we wonder how God wins, Luther penned, “Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God’s own choosing. Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He, Lord Sabaoth His name, from age to age the same, and He must win the battle.” Should you wonder what Sabaoth means, it is not the same as Sabbath. In Hebrew it means “hosts” or “armies” of heaven. With the militaristic language throughout the hymn (fortress, bulwark, foe, battle), it should come as little surprise that this word has a military leaning as well. So, the Lord of the armies of heaven will win this battle over our foes on earth.

We might assume the battle is won through violence, since that is our earthly understanding, but the psalmist explains it this way: “He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.” God takes away our defenses.

We lose when we break from God. God wins when our defenses which separate us from others and allow us to cause harm to others, are taken away. God wins when we turn to God in trust and when we stop battling one another, when we stop viewing one another as enemy. God wins when we love God and our neighbor. And so, the Devil, our ancient foe whose craft and power are great and armed with cruel hate, loses. If we trust in God through the saving grace of Jesus Christ, then we have no reason to fear the prince of darkness, nor his rage. Luther says, “one little word shall fell him.” This word is the Word, big W; the word is the way, and the truth, and the life and all who proclaim Him receive the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit. Thus, we who gather here have much to rejoice. So keeping in mind two last quotes credited to Martin Luther, “the Devil hates music because he cannot stand gaiety” and “Satan can smirk but he cannot laugh; he can sneer but he cannot sing,”¹² let us proceed to make the Devil angry as best as we can by giving glory to God through song. Let us make our prayer of joyful response be our

¹⁰ http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/luther_martin.shtml

¹¹ *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, Second Edition (New York: Random House Reference, 2001)

¹² www.sermonaudio.com/hymn_details.asp?PID=amightyfortressisourgod

standing to sing hymn 260, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”