

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Reformation Day (Observed)
Saturday, October 24th, 2020
Sunday, October 25th, 2020

Sermon: Our Mighty Fortress
Text: Psalm 46

Focus: God protects and rescues his people from sin and evil.
Function: That they would not be afraid of the chaos and mess known as the year 2020.
Structure: Text-Application
Locus: “He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil” (SC, 1st Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. “The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress” (Ps. 46:7, 11, ESV).¹

That is the refrain from today’s psalm, as well as the inspiration for the first line of Martin Luther’s famous hymn, “A Mighty Fortress”: ♪ “A mighty fortress is our God/A trusty shield and weapon...” (*LSB* 656).² It is the first hymn we sang today and the most famous of all Luther’s hymns. Some have called it “the battle hymn of the Reformation,” but when it first found publication, it was accompanied with the heading “A hymn of comfort.”³

I wonder what sort of comfort a friend of a friend found recently in the words of this hymn. Her entire house burned down a few weeks ago because of wildfires in Oregon (we in Colorado know something about that). When she returned home after the blaze, nothing could be salvaged. Nothing was left—absolutely nothing—except for a small fragment of burned

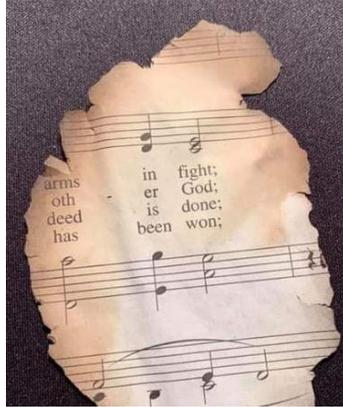
¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

² Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress,” tr. composite, in *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 656:1.

³ Joseph Herl *et al*, eds., “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” in *Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Hymns*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 836.

paper left from her hymnal. This precious paper has only a few notes and words remaining on it from Luther's hymn:

*arms in fight
other God
deed is done
has been won⁴*



Despite the tragedy of losing her home, photographs, and cherished items, the survival of this hymn fragment seems quite appropriate to me, especially when you consider its theme and later words:

*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.⁵*

Even when everything else is taken away from us, God's Kingdom remains. His *Word* remains! These belong to us in Christ. No one can take away from us God's Word or kingdom or our salvation. And *no one* can snatch us out of Jesus' hands (John 10:28-29). Now how is that for comfort? "The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress" (Ps. 46:7, 11).

Luther wrote "A Mighty Fortress" during "a period that saw an epidemic hit Wittenberg, a serious illness befall Martin Luther..., Turkish forces threatening the German borders, further threats from Catholic armies, and theological attacks from both Catholics and more radical

⁴ Image and story shared by permission from Facebook.

⁵ *LSB* 656:4.

Protestants.”⁶ In other words, Luther and the German princes were beset by enemies on all sides. Like the raging nations in Psalm 46:6, the Muslim and Catholic nations posed imminent threats. Pestilence and war and rumors of war abounded. The 1520’s were a terrifying and frightening period for Luther, the Lutheran princes, and the German peasants.⁷ So Luther chose the word fortress (*Burg*) instead of refuge (*Schultz*) in order to provide a strong image of comfort and protection in the face of fierce enemies.

Yet quite notably, Luther makes no mention of these earthly enemies. No, in “A Mighty Fortress,” Luther doesn’t speak against or pray for deliverance from either Turk or Pope. Rather, he views all enemies through the lens of Ephesians 6:12, where St. Paul writes: “For we do *not* wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” In other words, other people are not truly our enemies. Along those lines, neither the Democrats, ANTIFA, white supremacists, Iran, China, nor Russia are our real enemies. Our *real* enemy is Satan—the devil who tempts us to sin, doubt, despair, and outright unbelief.

Satan is “the old evil foe” mentioned in the first verse of Luther’s hymn. The Bible calls him “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 16:11) and “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2). The world appears to be forever under his sway and thumb. “On earth is not his equal” (*LSB* 656:1). He “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). If we try to stand against him in our own strength, we will fail. Pray that you don’t become his prey. (*Aside:* By the way, a good reason *never* to sing the first verse of “A Mighty Fortress” by itself is that it ends with Satan holding the day. Better to at least include verse 2!)

⁶ Herl, *LSB Companion*, 836.

⁷ The massacre known as the German Peasants War took place in 1524-25.

But our great Defender and Protector is our Savior Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus “the Lord of hosts,” Yahweh of armies (Ps. 46). “Jesus is Lord” (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3). He is “the valiant One” who fights for us against sin, death, and the devil by dying on the cross to forgive our sins and rising again to grant us eternal life. By his death, he destroys death (1 Cor. 15:26). By his glorious resurrection, he destroyed the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). Now not even the grave can contain us, because every Christian will rise on the Last Day to enjoy life in the new creation. “*He holds the field forever*” (LSB 656:2).

In Psalm 46:5, the psalmist promises that God will help us “when morning dawns.” The Hebrew literally means “at break of day.” Do you remember what happened “toward the dawn of the first week” (Matt. 28:1) three days after Jesus died on the cross? Christ rose from the dead! He came back to life!

Because Jesus died and rose again, we Christians are not afraid, no matter what the devil tries to throw against us. “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” (Ps. 46:2-3). “Though devils all the world should fill/All eager to devour us/We tremble not, we fear no ill/They shall not overpow’r us” (LSB 656:3). Why not? Because the devil is “judged; the deed is done; One little word can fell him.” And what word is that? None other than the name of *Jesus*. Demons shudder and hide when they hear that name. They beg not to be tossed back into the abyss (Luke 8:31). For even the devils are subject to us in Jesus’ name (Luke 10:17).

2020 has been a tough year for all of us. Perhaps that is an understatement. This may have been the most difficult year of our lives, beginning with an impeachment, pandemic, civil unrest, rioting and looting in our streets, a divisive election, and a record-setting wildfire season.

Friends, this is only October, and there may be more to come! But we are not afraid because “Yahweh of [angel] armies is with us; a refuge for us [is] the God of Jacob” (Ps. 46:7, CSM).⁸ “A mighty fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon...” (LSB 656:1). Jesus is “by our side upon the plain/With his good gifts and Spirit,” those gifts being his Word and Sacraments, the means of grace, by which he delivers to us the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation won for us on the cross (LSB 656:4). So no matter what rocks the devil throws into our pond, and no matter how big the ripples may appear, we will not be afraid. Christ has won, the deed is done, and he is with us always. *He* is our mighty fortress.

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, “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 (Ps. 46:2-3), though people die from coronavirus or any other cause of illness or injury, though *we ourselves* may contract “the virus,” though the world seems to be going to hell in a handbasket, though our preferred candidates may not be elected, though our nation’s forests and cities burn from wildfires and so-called “peaceful” protestors, though our consciences accuse us of our sins, yet we shall not fear. “Our vict’ry has been won; the Kingdom ours remaineth” (LSB 656:4).

Be still and know that he is God (Ps. 46:10). Cease and desist. Stop your striving and struggling. Let yourself be comforted by the blood of Jesus and his Word of peace. “The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress” (Ps. 46:7, 11). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁸ All Bible translations marked CSM are the author’s own, personal translation.