

“Our Mighty Fortress”

Psalm 46

October 27, 2013

Reformation Sunday

A fortress is a place of great safety with high walls and strong weapons. Its function is to protect people from enemies and all the danger they cause. The only way to take advantage of a fortress's protection is to be inside of its walls. If you are inside the fortress, you are safe. If you are outside the fortress when the doors are closed for an enemy's assault, no matter how hard you try, you are dead. We don't have fortresses any more (at least not in the medieval sense of the word), but we desire to be safe. What is your fortress?

It all depends on what danger you wish to be safe from. Danger was never part of God's plan for His creation. But the sinful rebellion of humanity has changed all of that. Sin has corrupted God's good creation, not in some general “spiritual” way, but in some very real and concrete ways described for us in our text for today.

There are natural disasters caused by sin and described in the beginning of Psalm 46. It speaks of the earth giving way (an earthquake), mountains falling into the sea, waters roaring and foaming.

There are societal disasters caused by sin and also described in this psalm. It speaks of nations raging and kingdoms tottering. There are conflicts among people, resulting in war and bloodshed.

But that's not all. Sin has corrupted us as well. Not only is our environment dangerous and our society destructive, but we are, too. By not only doing the evil in thought, word, and deed which God has forbidden, but also by failing to do all the good which God has commanded, we have separated ourselves from Him. A holy God cannot and will not allow sin and those who practice it into His presence. And the really sad thing is that, by nature, we don't even want to be in His presence. We would rather hide from it in fear as Adam and Eve did after the first sin.

This causes spiritual disasters which our world is constantly trying to fight against and deny. Sin produces guilt and shame. Our world says that we should not feel guilt or experience shame. Such false feelings are due to low self-esteem. We need to develop a healthier mental attitude and self image.

Sin also results in God's eternal condemnation in hell. This, too, is not popular so the world invents gods to its own liking – gods who are tolerant, sensitive, and inclusive of all. This led one cynic to say, "In the beginning, God created man in His image and, ever since then, man has been returning the favor.

But the most dangerous problems are not natural disasters, wars, and the like. Sin has put us into a serious battle, not with low self-esteem issues or outdated views of God, but with Satan himself. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "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." (Eph. 6:12)

Yet some look for safety in better built structures that can withstand earthquakes, floods, and other natural disasters. Others look for safety in better weapons of warfare or in skillfully crafted peace treaties.

For those who see that the problem is bigger than these very serious symptoms – that the real problem is sin – they seek safety in other places. On this celebration of Reformation Day, we remember what things were like during the days of Martin Luther. People were looking for safety from sin and damnation. They thought they found it in their good works. And if their works were not good enough or numerous enough so that they would have to undergo a stay in purgatory after they died, they sought safety in the purchase of indulgences which granted them time off their sentence in purgatory. They could purchase these with money, but they could also obtain them by going on pilgrimages, venerating (worshiping) relics (remnants of Biblical characters and their possessions) and so on.

Today, we look for safety in other religious activities. On Reformation Day, we may think we are safe from sin and damnation because we are Martin Luther's spiritual descendants and have the correct doctrine – the pure teaching of God's Word. We may think we have obtained an indulgence because we have endured confirmation class, have our names on a church membership list and even have certificates to prove it.

But the problem is bigger than we often realize in our postmodern age where there is no truth and a constantly changing standard of right and wrong. But Martin Luther realized it in his day and age. His good works and religious actions did not give him peace of mind, heart, or soul. He realized that he would never be safe from sin, death, and hell if he depended upon himself and what he could do.

Luther wrote the famous hymn which we always sing this time of year which is based on Psalm 46. In looking at this text, he realized where His fortress – His place of safety - would be. Psalm 46 says, "The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress." And so Luther wrote, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God", not a mighty fortress is our social reform, military might, good works, correct doctrine, or religious piety.

Why? His hymn explains it. It shows who our true enemy is. It says, "The old satanic foe has sworn to work us woe. With craft and dreadful might He arms himself to fight. On earth he has no equal." Our enemy is Satan who wishes to destroy us in this life and for all eternity. Satan is strong. There is no force on earth equal to Satan. The old translation of this hymn said, "Deep guile and great might are his dread arms in fight."

The hymn also shows that our strongest and most pious efforts cannot solve this problem or defeat our enemy. It says, "No strength of ours can match his might. We would be lost, rejected." We cannot overcome Satan and win this spiritual war by trying to do good or be more religious. Satan is too strong and our strength is too weak.

But there is good news and the hymn shows us where to find it: "But now a champion comes to fight, Whom God Himself elected. You ask who this may be? The Lord of Hosts is He, Christ

Jesus, mighty Lord, God's only Son, adored. He holds the field victorious." Yes, Jesus won the war and holds the field victorious, but it was not an easy fight to free us from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Jesus had to offer Himself as the sacrifice for the sin of all humanity by dying on the cross. His blood shed on the cross was the redemption – the price paid – to free us from sin's punishment, deliver us from death to life, and overcome Satan and his power once and for all.

But Jesus did that, not by force or out of compulsion, but because of His great love for you and in obedience to the will of God. Jesus' work was successful. The price He paid was sufficient. We have been forgiven of all our sins. We have been delivered from death and hell. We are safe from Satan now and for all eternity. How do we know this? Jesus rose from the dead. His resurrection is the sign and proof of victory, as well as the guarantee of our redemption and salvation.

What does this mean for us? With God as our Savior and our Fortress, does this mean that life becomes a bed of roses and that there are now no more problems? No. The Psalmist writes, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear" when all these troubles occur. The troubles will come but we don't have to be afraid because He is our help in trouble. Troubles, no matter how serious they are, cannot overcome us. As Luther's hymn says, "Though hordes of devils fill the land All threat'ning to devour us, We tremble not, unmoved we stand;' They cannot overpower us." He will stop the conflicts and the fighting. The Psalmist promises, "He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire."

All of this sounds very good, but it can only come about in one way. An earthly fortress can be built with the strongest and highest walls and have the most powerful weapons in the world, but none of these things protect you and give you safety if you stand outside the fortress when the enemy comes to fight. You have to be in the fortress to be protected.

It is the same with the mighty fortress who is our God. We think we are safe simply because we know about the fortress, but we are not. Satan has been defeated yet he has not given up the fight. Sin has been overcome but its symptoms are still obvious. Our mighty fortress has all the

protection from sin and Satan which we need. Our mighty fortress has all the weapons to fight against sin and Satan which we need. But they do us no good if we stand outside of the fortress or, even worse, wander away from it.

God has brought you into the fortress when you were baptized into Jesus Christ. You were connected to Him and His saving work. Your sins were washed away. Satan was cast out of you. A new life was begun in you. Stay in the fortress with others seeking safety and protection here. We gather in this church because it is a place of safety, not because of architectural design or the strength of its stone, bricks, and mortar. It is safe because our Mighty Fortress is here. Here God protects us by giving us His gifts. Here God gives us the weapon we need to stay safe – “the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God.” (Eph. 6:17) Here God feeds us for the fight with the very body and blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, which was given and shed for us to forgive our sin.

Our mighty fortress – the place where we find true safety – is not our economy, our military, or our country. Our mighty fortress is not our good works or religious piety. Our mighty fortress is not Martin Luther or his doctrine. A mighty fortress is our God. In Him, we are safe, even when nature, evil men, or Satan himself seem to be winning because God is with us during the struggle and God has obtained the eternal victory for us. As Luther concluded his hymn, “God’s Word forever shall abide, No thanks to foes who fear it; For God Himself fights by our side With weapons of the Spirit. Were they to take our house, Goods, honor, child or spouse, Though life be wrenched away, They cannot win the day. The Kingdom’s ours forever!” Amen.