

Reformation Sunday 2025. Psalm 46

If you've hung around this joint for more than a year or two, you know that there are certain hymns that are always sung on certain occasions. We will never get through a Trinity Sunday without singing "Holy, Holy, Holy." The first carol on Christmas Eve is always "Joy to the World." These choices may not be written in stone, but the power of tradition is formidable. And from this hall of customary hymns, on Reformation Sunday we choose Martin Luther's song paraphrasing Psalm 46, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

It is possibly the best-known Lutheran hymn, written during a moment in church history when the ground was shifting so quickly, the future so unclear and tumultuous, that fellow reformer John Calvin believed it was the disintegration of the world. But Luther would not, could not, recant his writings, even in the face of deadly opposition from the Roman Catholic Church. "My conscience is held captive by the Word of God, and to act against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand," he is recorded as saying. "I cannot do otherwise."

At the time, it was not a foregone conclusion that Prince Frederick would throw his political and geographical weight into protecting Luther rather than letting him be burned at the stake. It was not a certainty that the Holy Roman Empire would begin to buckle under the strain of endless war. Then as always, no one knew how things were going to turn out, at least in the short term. And so Luther turned to the promises of Psalm 46.

I have to say, one of the great gifts of this scripture is that it doesn't sugarcoat things. It doesn't just come to the mic and say "God's got this," and sit down. It spells out the kind of chaos that threatens to undo God's good creation: waters rage and foam; mountains tremble. The very foundations of the earth are threatened. And—the natural order of human relations is equally in crisis: the nations roar, and the kingdoms totter. I'm betting these are relatable claims right now for anyone in Ukraine, Gaza, the West Bank, Sudan. This is real life.

So we're reminded ultimately not to place our trust in any earthly place, person, or thing for our security amid the storms of life: "If we in our own

strength confide, our striving turns to losing,” goes the hymn. The psalm calls us instead to place our trust in God alone.¹

By contrast flows the “river whose streams make glad the city of God,” a reminder that even when reality itself threatens to shake apart, there are spaces and places of refuge, though they might be internal. I’m thinking about what Renaldo Hudson said a few weeks ago about being free even in solitary confinement when your mind is free. And how, as in our gospel reading, you can be walking around outside yet completely captive.

As Luther began developing his theology, he came to something of the same conclusion. His treatise “The Freedom of a Christian” argues that a Christian is both a free person, justified before God by faith alone, and a dutiful servant of all, bound to serve others out of love. He contended that Jesus Christ liberates believers from the need to earn salvation through works or rituals, but this freedom from the burden of “earning” God’s favor is not for selfish use, but to allow Christians to serve their neighbors spontaneously and compassionately, as Christ served them.

So in the midst of struggle, national or personal disasters, we are given both this internal, spiritual freedom, and with that also a responsibility to overcome our paralysis and act.

“God speaks, and the earth melts away.” Not only does this phrase point to the power of God, but it invites us to cast our sights a little higher. If the Word of God can create all that is, the Word of God can similarly deconstruct what has come to be. That is a fearsome power, of course, and we are right to be in awe of it, but the very scope and scale of God’s action means that whatever is troubling you today can be gone tomorrow.

It is similarly a bit alarming to be pointed toward “what desolations God has brought upon the earth,” until you see that the natural apposite to “desolations” is God breaking the bow, shattering the spear, and burning the shield with fire. Humans want to believe that defending their ground with violence is somehow underwritten by God’s will. Rather, God’s power is directed toward making wars to cease.

¹ Ruthanna Hooke, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*, “Psalm 46.”

The story goes that long before posting the theses at Wittenberg, Luther was riding in a ferocious lightning storm. Thrown from his horse by a nearby strike, he prayed in terror to St. Ann, promising to become a monk if he were spared. After the storm he made good on his oath despite his father's objections. It's little wonder he was drawn to words like "God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear."

But maybe the call isn't to suppress fear but to transform it. Modern psychology would tell us that denying fear just forces it underground in forms like aggression and defensiveness. German theologian Dorothee Sölle wrote that "[Faith] admits the existence of fear, but it does not leave fear untouched. . . . we can make a productive force out of [our fears], and an instrument of peace and justice."

I like this idea as both a practical and a faithful reckoning with the dangers that beset us. Fear is a natural response to being threatened, but you do not need to respond out of that fear. God is at work to bring an end to the forces that defy abundant life. And God is with you; it is OK to rest in that knowledge. "Be still then, and know that I am God."

So what are the takeaways from over 500 years of Reformation history? A key principle of the reformers is that reformation can't be "one and done," but the church must always harken back to its fundamentals: God is your refuge and your strength, a very present help in trouble. Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, has come to set you free. Holy Spirit is present with you now and always.

To the extent that we the church are not able to communicate this hope in God, we need reforming. To the extent that we the church do not address the spiritual needs of those outside our doors, we need reforming. To the extent that we the church look like the same institution which has caused harm to many, we need reforming.

What is the stand the Church will take, because we cannot do otherwise?

We listen for the Holy Spirit. Amen.