

"Safe Within the Fortress"

October 25, 2020 - Reformation Sunday

The Prayer for Understanding:

The Witness of the Scripture:

Old Testament: Psalm 46

The Sermon:

Let me take you back to 1945, to Helsinki, Finland, and to be precise, the train station.

Shortly after the conclusion of World War II, when diplomatic relations between Finland and Russia were almost at the breaking point, a group of Finnish statesmen left for Moscow on a delicate diplomatic mission. A few patriotic Finns were there to see them off.

Now it happened the Communists turned out in full force, and as the train was about to pull away from the station, they burst forth singing the Communist Internationale. But, before the Internationale had concluded, the small minority, at great personal peril began singing another song, a song with a different kind of send off.

Gradually through the station, first one voice and then another joined together:

"A mighty fortress is our God
A bulwark never failing...
Our Helper, He amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing

I.

There is something about this hymn from the great reformer, Martin Luther, which speaks to people in real need. In a most remarkable way, it expresses the genius of the Christian Faith.

Luther wrote this hymn as a kind of extended commentary on the Psalm we just read; especially the first two verses.

The first thing we are told is deceptively simple; no gimmicks here. We are confronted with a monumental truth:

"God is"
Is what?
"God is our refuge and our strength,
a very present help in trouble."

Of course, for some this may seem backwards. It is not difficult to believe in God when things are going smoothly. Then we love God, we trust God, we may even worship God on occasion, thankful for blessings received.

But when things get a frantic, or real trouble comes into our lives; or let what Luther called, "the flood of mortal ills" swamp our boat... that's when doubt comes and distrust begins to grow.

Maybe even the idea forms that somehow we've been cheated:

- What kind of God is this?
- How can God let this happen to me?
- Can there even *be a God* if these things are going on?

Have you heard this in terms of Covid-19 or in the ills that have swamped us? I have.

In other words, for most people, trouble and "mortal ills" challenge their faith in God; we begin to doubt the whole enterprise. Faith is tested and in danger of being lost.

But this is not Luther's experience, nor if you read the psalms, is it the Psalmist's experience. It is precisely in the midst of trouble, conflicts and mortal ills, that the reality of God becomes most apparent, most vital, most real. People, up to their necks in trouble: "These are when our God is most real."

So here is the first point: God is most surely to be found in the midst of trouble, conflict, mortal ills. If God is not there, God is not worth much anywhere else.

II.

But there is more to this story: Luther now tells us that in addition to this Mighty Fortress, there is a second reality of life: the forces of opposition are strong in our world. He writes:

"For still our ancient foe
Does seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great,"

In the third verse, he continues about the "world with devils filled" and the "Prince of Darkness grim."

Today we know there is no guy with horns walking around in red tights, a pitchfork and a tail, breathing fire and making people do bad things. Given the pandemic, we'll not even see them next Saturday night, dressed for trick or treating.

But we don't need Luther's medieval picture to be know very well how this world is filled with forces working evil and chaos in human life. Set your own examples of demonic forces at work: war, famine, hatred, violence, ethnic cleansing, racism which is both subtle

and seen, the growing gap between rich and poor, pervasive anger which seems as a cancer in society.

III.

I find myself deeply grateful for this hymn because here's the point: Christians can look at the world as it really is because the stark reality of evil is not the final thing to be said.

Luther wants us to walk away with one more word. What is really and truly decisive about Luther's faith is that this "prince of darkness grim" cannot conquer the "Mighty Fortress." The critical battle has already taken place and the Fortress stands strong as ever.

Listen to how Luther puts it, and notice that now the references to evil are always surrounded with the fact it has been conquered:

"And though this world with devils filled
Should threaten to undo us.
We will not fear - for God has willed
His truth to triumph through us."

Is Luther just whistling in the dark?

He continues with our stubborn belief that we can get along very well without God:

"Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;"

We are doomed to failure, except for one thing:

"Were not the right man on our side,
The man of God's own choosing;"

And then, as if anticipating our next question:

"You ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he:
And he must win the battle."

IV.

If we can wrap up this hymn ...

- Luther has placed his faith in the Fortress because the Son of the Owner of that Fortress went outside the safety of its walls into the world to do battle with the forces of evil.
- He battled all those forces, absorbed all their punishment, and still came out on top.

You see, it begins to fit together. This is why Luther was so sure that God can be found in the thick of "mortal ills" - because that is precisely where God in Jesus Christ is to be found: amid the flood of hatred, pain, scorn, rejection - Jesus Christ is there - doing the job of healing.

Jesus Christ is "the right man on our side."

V.

So, where does this all lead?

Listen to the concluding lines of this hymn and realize that Luther wrote them when his own life was in deep danger, that they have been sung by Christians in prison camps, by persons doomed to die for their convictions, by people condemned to long, difficult illness.

"Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill,
God's truth abideth still,
His Kingdom is forever."

Luther is saying: "Let God use my life in loving, reconciling, self-giving service. God is the one I trust above all else." We are called to service in the world and for what may come.

This is authentic Christian trust. Certainly, it's not easy to say. I am not sure where my faith would be if, as the Psalmist says, the mountains were to shake into the sea. I can only say this:

"God's truth abideth still,
God's kingdom is forever."

A Mighty Fortress is Our God

1. A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and pow'r are great, and armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.
2. Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing,
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.

3. And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us;
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

4. That word above all earthly pow'rs, no thanks to them abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us sideth;
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.