

***A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing. . . . "A Mighty Fortress is Our God"
God is our refuge and our strength; a very present help in trouble. . . . Psalm 46***

Reformation Sunday is special day for us Lutherans. We will sing the greatest of Martin Luther's hymns--"A Mighty Fortress is Our God"--the hymn, which according to Ulrich Leupold, "more than any other epitomizes Luther's thought and personal experience" and is a rather free paraphrase of Psalm 46. The psalm we will sing responsively this Sunday is Psalm 46. Many scholars believe Luther wrote the text of "A Mighty Fortress" to interpret and apply the 46th Psalm to the church of his own time and its struggles.

Psalm 46 is tightly composed, with three, three-verse-long stanzas and two refrains: Stanza 1 (verses 1-3); Stanza 2 (verses 4-6); Refrain "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." (verse 7); Stanza 3 (verses 8-10); and Refrain "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." (verse 11)

Stanza One--The Roaring of Creation and God "our Refuge"

In the first stanza, the psalm juxtaposes the steady and secure image of God as "refuge" with the image of the earth and seas in uproar. The image of "earth" shaking and "sea" roaring is an image of creation itself in rebellion against God's creative order. This image is a reminder that the fallen condition of creation goes beyond mere human disobedience. The fallen condition encompasses all of creation, all of nature. Earthquakes and hurricanes cause destruction. Disease and disability strike. Death awaits all. And yet the psalm names the one trustworthy source of security that can be relied upon in the midst of this roaring rebellion: God is our refuge, "therefore we will not fear."

Stanza Two--The Roaring of the Nations and the River of God

The second stanza the psalm intensifies the sense of threat by naming the national threat that empires such as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome and many smaller nations posed to the descendants of Jacob throughout Israel's existence. All of creation is fallen and in rebellion, but human sin and rebellion is more nefarious, or at least more potent--making evils such as genocide and war possible. Do we not see this today in the atrocities being visited upon Israel and Gaza by terrorists bent upon destroying the Jews? "The nations are in an uproar" (v.6) summarizes the intensification of the rebellious threat. The corresponding promise that the second stanza offers is the presence of God with His people. Here, God's presence is metaphorically described as "a river whose streams make glad the city of God."--a stark image of the refreshing and life-sustaining river to a city and people in an arid climate under siege by an invading army. The image of the river flowing from the throne of God was, a metaphor for the presence of God with the people and their protection. In the refrain, which we can imagine the people singing, the words of trust become almost a creedal confession of confidence: "The Lord of hosts is with us."

Stanza Three--Be Still and Know that I am God

The psalm's final stanza culminates with a statement of trust that is cloaked as an invitation and then with a promise. Here, the invitation is to come and be silent--to witness God's powerful ability to crush rebellion and then to be silent. In the end, God even speaks the promise: "Be still, and know that I am God." And then God's voice closes the psalm by asserting God's exaltation over both spheres of creation that have been in rebellion against God (i.e., nature and man). "I am exalted among the nations" and "I am exalted in the earth".

That is the promise of both Psalm 46 and, in a larger sense, of the entire Bible. That the God of Jacob and the Lord of Israel will, in the end of all things, prove a faithful refuge for those who are caught in the fallen condition of creation and humanity. The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge. And in the closing words of Luther's mighty hymn "God's truth abideth still; his kingdom is forever!"

**COME THIS SUNDAY
TO CELEBRATE THE REFORMATION
TO REJOICE IN THE BAPTISM OF OUR BROTHER, DAVID STOKES
TO RECEIVE THE WORD AND SACRAMENTS**