

## ***A Mighty Fortress Is Our God***

This Sunday, June 9<sup>th</sup> is the Third Sunday after Pentecost. The lessons for the day speak of sin, iniquities, wasting away, and demon possession. Seems pretty dark and depressing! But over, under and through it all is the message of HOPE—of redemption, of renewal of salvation. When I saw that the recessional hymn we sing this Sunday is Martin Luther’s “***A Mighty Fortress is our God***”, I said—wait a minute—is this Reformation Sunday—No! Is this a Sunday when we read Psalm 46 upon which this great hymn is based—No! So why, I thought, did Pastor Sergio choose this hymn for this Sunday? For some answers to that question, let’s look at the history of this great “Lutheran” hymn.

Many of us think of “*A Mighty Fortress*” as the “Battle Hymn of the Reformation.” It is one of the most translated hymns in the history of the Church and was written by the greatest of the Reformers—Martin Luther. What many of us might not realize is that the Festival of the Reformation was not celebrated during Luther’s lifetime. Therefore, the hymn was not written to celebrate the Reformation, which is the commemoration of the publication of the Ninety-five Theses on Oct. 31, 1517. Only later, after the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), when the Reformation was celebrated as a regular part of the church year in Saxony, Luther’s home region, did the hymn become associated with the festival.

Considering that “*A Mighty Fortress*” is Luther’s most famous hymn, we know remarkably little about it. Nor are we even sure when Luther wrote it. The earliest existing hymnal in which it appears is from 1533. Most scholars think Luther wrote the hymn between 1521 and 1529, with the majority of scholars settling on 1527–28.

These years were some of the darkest in Luther’s life. A heading from a broadsheet (i.e. “sheet music”) of “*A Mighty Fortress*” published in Augsburg reads “A Hymn of Comfort.” Rather than a battle hymn, Luther intended this hymn to be one of comfort, one of hope. While we are not certain what prompted Luther to write the hymn, scholars have suggested a number of events during these dark years.

In August 1527, a man who followed Luther’s teaching was martyred. In the fall of 1527, a plague broke out in Wittenberg. In December 1527, Luther wrote to a colleague: “We are all in good health except for Luther himself, who is physically well, but outwardly the whole world and inwardly the devil and all his angels are making him suffer.” A few days later, in January 1528, Luther wrote that he was undergoing a period of temptation that was the worst he had experienced in his life. When Luther speaks of “temptation,” he uses the German word. While *Anfechtung* is translated “temptation” or “trial,” it refers to anything that causes anxiety, doubt, fear, suffering, or terror in a person’s life. For instance, in December 1527, Luther’s daughter, Elizabeth, was born sickly. In May 1528, she died. The six months of wrestling with the Lord in prayer to save his sick daughter was a period of temptation (*Anfechtung*) for Luther. He was mentally and spiritually fatigued. He was under the cross of suffering. Yet, he took comfort in the Psalms and trusted in the promises of Jesus.

Besides the challenges brought on by the plague and tragedy in his personal life, struggles abounded in the Church. When Luther likely wrote the hymn, his greatest challenge arose from factions within “reformer groups”. There were people who claimed to follow the Bible (and Luther) who wanted to revolt against the government, something Luther did not approve of. Others questioned whether pastors were necessary; they believed anyone could proclaim the Word of God. Some doubted whether infants should be baptized. The greatest and most divisive controversy among the reformers also took place during these years—the Sacramentarian Controversy, that is, the fight over the Lord’s Supper.

Some argued that Jesus could not really mean what He said, and that the words, “This is My body . . . This is My blood” needed to be understood in a different way—that “is” did not mean “is” but rather “symbolized.” Several hundred different interpretations appeared, all denying that Jesus actually gave His body and blood to eat and to drink in the Lord’s Supper. Luther saw this controversy as directly related to the proclamation of the Gospel. He believed that the literal words of Jesus needed to be confessed and defended. In this controversy, Luther argued that there was nothing more true, certain, or powerful than the Word of God. The Lord’s Word is a “mighty fortress.”; it is the “trusty shield” to defend against errors and evil, and the “weapon” used to fight against them. The evil foe was using deceit and “deep guile” to obscure the words of Jesus.

In stanza 3, the hymn says, “Though devils all the world should fill.” Luther truly believed he was living in the Last Days because the preaching of the Gospel—that we are justified by grace through faith—and the Scriptures were clearly taught,

and controversy after controversy arose. The world seemed full of “devils” perverting the Lord’s teaching. The stanza concludes, “One little word can fell him.” In the case of the controversy over the Lord’s Supper, the little word that “can fell” the devil is “is” from the Lord’s words, “This is My body . . . This is My blood.”

The hymn concludes by confessing that the Word of the Lord will remain in the world even if people are not thankful for it “Our victory has been won; the Kingdom ours remaineth.” Luther’s hymn is one of comfort and hope amid trial, suffering and temptation. And so, almost 500 years after Luther wrote this magnificent hymn, we can see how the plague, the death of his child, the controversies in the church, and other struggles in his life caused Luther to cling to his Lord, who is the Mighty Fortress of all those who trust in Him. Cannot we, in our own trials and struggles, likewise cling to the Lord, who is indeed **“A Mighty Fortress”**?

*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.*