

Reformation Sunday  
October 25, 2020

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. <sup>2</sup> Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; <sup>3</sup> though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. **Selah** <sup>4</sup> There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. <sup>5</sup> God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. <sup>6</sup> The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; God utters God's voice, the earth melts. <sup>7</sup> The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold. **Selah** <sup>8</sup> Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations the LORD has brought on the earth. <sup>9</sup> The LORD makes wars cease to the end of the earth, breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; burns the shields with fire. <sup>10</sup> "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." <sup>11</sup> The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold. **Selah** (Ps. 46:1 NRS)

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ. I am delighted and grateful to speak to you for Reformation Sunday this year. I want to lift up Psalm 46.

Psalm 46 has been called Martin Luther's psalm because this psalm was the basis for Luther's most famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress." No wonder that Psalm 46 is our lectionary psalm on Reformation Sunday.

Psalm 46 speaks of danger and hope – authentic hope in the face of real danger. In the Bible, physical danger and spiritual danger are all mixed up together. Physical danger puts a person at risk spiritually, and spiritual danger threatens your physical wellbeing. It is all bound up together. That is the way it is in Psalm 46; (that is) the way it is in the world: the danger is met with the hope.

And hope wins, hope wins because — "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold."

You may have noticed when I read Psalm 46 that I included the word "Selah". "Selah" is a Hebrew word; "selah" is not a translation; "selah" is what the word sounds like in Hebrew. All together, the word "Selah" shows up 74 times in the psalms – three times here in Psalm 46.

Most of the time, when Psalm 46 is used in worship, the "Selah" is dropped out. Selah doesn't get translated because nobody knows exactly how to translate it. It is sort of a cross between Hallelujah and Amen. "Selah" shows explosive happiness, relief, triumph, celebration, and gratitude all rolled into one. Imagine your team down by a run in the bottom of the ninth, with two outs and a runner on; your batter hits a game-winning homerun, and you jump up with a shout. That shout is a Selah.

So.....

We will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

**Selah**

(And two times) The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold. **Selah**

Remember the “Selah”. We need to get to the “Selah”.

The whole Psalm 46 is a psalm *about God, what God does and will do about suffering* ---

Psalm 46 announces the God who brings hope to struggle and suffering. The psalmist has hope in the future despite present struggle and suffering because the psalmist trusts that God is in charge. The psalm expresses trust that God will set things right when there is upheaval in nature, i.e. natural disasters. This is verses one through three, with mountains shaking and water roaring. And the psalm expresses trust that God will set things right when there are human-made disasters, war in particular. This is verses six through nine. When God intervenes, marauding powers are powerless. “God breaks the bow; God shatters the spear; God burns the shields with fire.”

As I said, the focus of the psalm is on God. The whole psalm is a psalm *about God, what God does and will do* ---

With the exception of one verse: verse 10. Verse 10 is a statement made *by* God. And the Lord thunders, “Be still and know that I am God”? This is God speaking to the war-makers; God pulls rank on all the kings and princes of the nations – who act as though they are all powerful, as though they are the highest authority. And God says, “No”: “Be still and know that I am God!”

The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. **Selah**

I don’t have to tell you that there is an enormous amount of fear and anger swirling around now? The pandemic has brought out the best in some people and it has brought out the worst in others. And though we are all so, so tired of the pandemic, infection rates are going up in many places and the pandemic is not going away soon. Dr. Michael Osterholm, a Lutheran and the director of the University of Minnesota’s Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, was on NBC’s Meet the Press this past Sunday; Dr. Osterholm said, “We do have vaccines and therapeutics coming down the pike” ... however ... “The next six-to-12 weeks are going to be the darkest of the entire pandemic.”

So ---- is it fair to say we in store for more fear and anger?

Fear and anger are not all bad. Fear and anger were designed by God to give our bodies the sudden bursts of strength and speed we need in emergencies, for taking risks for the sake of generosity, love, and care for others. Fear and anger can ignite our passion for justice and for an end to cruelties. Our capacity for fear and anger is a gift from God.

But when fear and anger become a way of life, they paralyze the spirit, and cloud judgment. Fear and anger can harden into a way of life characterized by cynicism, judgmentalism, and hatred.

The dangers that Psalm 46 talks about were real. There were good reasons for the Israelites to be afraid; and there were good reasons for them to be angry. But Psalm 46 takes the Israelites away from cynicism, judgmentalism, and hatred – into hope.

This hope is Psalm 46's message to you, to me, to all of us now. Take these words into your heart and soul: The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. **Selah**

Martin Luther and those who joined him in the Reformation back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, were boldly ready to face danger and even potential death for the sake of the transforming proclamation of God's full and free grace for sinners through Jesus Christ, the unquenchable love God for all of us and all our neighbors. But still, Luther and his compatriots had those times when they were down, drained, and dispirited. In their dimmest hours, Luther would say to his friend and co-reformer Philip Melancthon, "Come, Philip, let us sing the forty-sixth Psalm" -- the psalm to renew their faith and refresh their spirits.

COVID has curtailed our singing. And I lament the need to refrain from singing together as much as anybody – even though I know that refraining from singing is the wisest practice for the time being. So, I won't say, "Come, let us sing the forty-sixth Psalm." But I will say "thank you" to God for giving us the forty-sixth Psalm to renew our faith and refresh our spirits.

During this pandemic, on a typical Sunday, I tune in on 3 to 5 worship services of congregations around our synod. It has been wonderful. I have listened to your stories; I have joined in your prayers; in you, I have seen Psalm 46 glimpses of God at work in our world saturated with anger and fear around the pandemic and divisive presidential election politics. I am grateful to God for you. Instead of focusing on people who are bashing and belittling others, I experience from you behavior that reflects the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5).

You are going to continue to face dangers and challenges – collectively (as a church, as a community, even globally) and individually. New dangers and challenges will also come up. If you remember nothing else from this sermon, please remember this – it is for you:

Hope wins. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble... The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold. **Selah**

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