Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

**A Mighty Fortress Is Our God**

**Hymnn #656**

Mid-week Lent 1

2.24.2021

Ein Feste Burg, or A Mighty Fortress, is the hymn of the day both for Reformation Day and Invocavit, Lent 1. So, having sung it as the Hymn of the Day, with pride of placement before the sermon this past Sunday, we will examine it more closely today in this time of meditation.

I must say that this is indeed a great time to reflect upon this hymn considering that we are undergoing this pandemic. Why, you ask? Because of the setting in which Luther wrote it. It was penned between 1527 and 1529 as an epidemic hit Wittenberg, at a time when serious illness even befell Dr Luther. But that was not all! Turkish forces were also threatening the German borders, while the threat from Catholic armies was also a concern. Of course, there were also the theological attacks from both Catholics and more radical Protestants which were also serious considerations.

How many today consider this the "battle hymn of the Reformation"? In honesty, it was actually considered "a hymn of comfort," something surely necessary at that time with all that they were enduring.

Presently this hymn is placed in the section of hymnals dealing with the church and the word of God making it a polemical hymn, that is, a hymn teaching and defending the faith.

There are two “tunes” used in our hymnal (#656 & #657), with the original tune being the rhythmic version used in 656. There is not 100% documentational unity in how the isorythmic versions arose. It is however speculated that as congregations sang hymns in building which had very dynamic acoustics, mostly without organ accompaniment, the singing gradually slowed.

The rhythmic version, #656, is Luther’s original version and is a quite lively and compelling tune when sung at an appropriate tempo. Sadly, in many congregations today it is sung too slowly. And no, the two melodies are not interchangeable – the texts for each need to be used for the appropriate tune.

OK, on to our hymn.

It has often been said, and you can see from the bottom of the first page, that Psalm 46 receives prominence as the inspiration for this hymn. And, as we know from last week, Luther does like to do a rhythmic translation of a Psalm into a hymn. So it is that verse one starts out that way, “A mighty fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon.” Note that he is not just our shield, not just a protection against attack, but also our weapon. “He helps us free from every need that hath us now o’ertaken.”

It is at this point which Luther truly deviates from the Psalm by introducing the devil, who makes no appearance in Psalm 46. And, the remainder of the hymn is a depiction of the battle between Christ and this old evil foe. So, can this truly be called a “version” of Psalm 46?

We look to the *Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Hymns Vol.* 1.

The answer to this question comes from Luther himself in his *Summaries of the Psalms* of 1531. After describing how Israel sang this Psalm to God in thanksgiving for protecting Jerusalem from all enemies, Luther continues: “But we sing to God in praise because He is with us and miraculously protects His Word and Christendom against the gates of hell, against all devils, factious spirits, the world, the flesh, sins, death, etc.” Luther equates the kings and heathen who arrayed themselves against Israel with the spiritual enemies of the Christian. His hymn is not, therefore, simply a translation of the psalm into the vernacular, but an expansion of it into the New Testament, albeit to a greater extent than with his other hymns based upon psalms, all of which were written several years before this one.

Now it is interesting to note that in the middle of this first verse He introduces Satan, the old evil foe, and by the end of the verse, it seems that he is winning. By the way, this leads me to make a point. There are reasons we sing all the stanzas of hymns. Can you imagine ending with verse one? On earth is not his (Satan’s) equal. What a depressing thought that is.

We often sing hymns verse by verse. Have you ever thought of them as connected, that there is a continuity? Do you see it here as you slip into the 2nd verse? We already confessed that on earth there is no equal to Satan, now we confess that we, by our own might, can do nothing. If left to our own, we would lose.

But, we have another who fights in our stead, the valiant One. This One is none other than He who God Himself elected. Do you know Him? Yes, Jesus Christ. Of Sabbaoth Lord. Luther takes verses 7 and 11 of the Psalm where it speaks of the Lord of hosts, and gives Him a name – Jesus, God’s Christ. He is the One who holds the field against all enemies.

Is there a global pandemic? Jesus Christ is the answer, He holds the field forever.

Is there pressure against Christ’s Church to cave to the teachings and theologies of the world? Jesus Christ is the answer, He holds the field forever.

Are you ridiculed for what you believe? Jesus Christ is the answer, He holds the field forever.

Do you fear death? Jesus Christ is the answer, He holds the field forever.

Do you fear anything? Jesus Christ is the answer, He holds the field forever.

That is exactly how the third verse begins. Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us. Who are these devils? Satan’s minions would not appear before you all in red like the pictured visions we have of what devils look like, flames licking up and down their body with a pitchfork in their hand.

Our world is full of devils, the spiritual forces of evil in this present realm, They come clothed in social or political issues, they hide as illnesses, or maybe even as friends. Sometimes they come clothed in the garb of sheep, or even as under-shepherds. Does not matter what they look like, they are trying to lead us astray – eager to devour us.

You and I have no fear though, do we! We neither tremble nor fear ill. Why? They cannot overpower us. Satan, the one who appeared to be winning at the end of the first verse, scowls at us. He gives off a fierce appearance, he comes off terrifying. He cannot harm us. In fact, He has already been judged, the deed is already done. It is done, accomplished upon the cross. One little word can fell him.

What is that word? Christ! Christ crucified! Jesus.

Dearly beloved of God, Satan pours out everything that is in himself, all his hatred, his wickedness, his vile evil and power upon Christ. Satan’s followers spat upon Him, mocked Him, beat Him, whipped Him, nailed Him to the cross, and stood beneath it mocking Him. And in Christ death, Satan becomes powerless for the grave, Satan’s ultimate power, could not hold Jesus.

You are baptized into the Victor, Jesus Christ. His death and resurrection are yours!

Satan’s greatest villainy is to lead you away from Jesus, away from your salvation. It is so easy to get you to sin, that is mere child’s play. Satan barely has to try, for your own flesh is a willing and compliant enemy, assisting and encouraging Satan. So you fall into sin! But, to tempt you to believe that you are unworthy of the forgiveness Christ purchased, to tempt you to believe that you are unforgiveable, that might work.

On the other hand, if he can get you to think that you do not need what Christ purchased? That would work too. To have you look at others knowing how much better a Christian you are than them, that you are, in comparison, not a sinner. To get you to believe you are a good person – that might work? You see, thinking that way, you don’t need Jesus.

You and I cling to Christ. Jesus is my rock, my sure defense. I am baptized into Christ. Christ speaks a word of forgiveness to me. I dine on Christ’s holy flesh and drink of the cup of His blood He poured out for me. Christ is my final answer!

Yes, that Word remains – The Word of God made flesh. Jesus, that One little Word. That Word is out there on the plain. He is there in the midst of this desolation in which we wander. In the midst of this life, Christ is there with us.

How is He with us? You heard the hymn. Christ Himself is present, with His good gifts and Spirit. It is like I just told you, He is there with us in Word and Sacrament. In these precious gifts His Spirit is present to build us up in faith and life.

And no matter what happens in this life, whether they take our life, possession, reputation, wife, or children, Christ is still with us. Church doesn’t need a program. We don’t need a different kind of preaching. All we need is Christ in Word and Sacrament – Christ with us! All of this life may disappear, but the victory is still ours. It has been won for us and is delivered to us.

In Christ we have the Kingdom! We have it now, and we have it forever.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.