

The Commemoration of the Reformation (observed)

October 30, 2022

P: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

C: **Amen.**

Scripture Readings

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.

The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Come, behold the works of the Lord,
how he has brought desolations on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the chariots with fire.

“Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!”

The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Romans 3:19-28

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

John 8:31-36

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Sermon

This is the first time I've prepared to preach on Reformation Day and the theme of the Reformation since I was back in Wittenberg in May. It was a wonderful experience, and I really appreciated the opportunity to spend not just one day but a couple of weeks in that town, seeing and learning and experiencing all that's there concerning our theological heritage.

Yet oddly enough, it also reminded me about the universal nature of the Christian faith: Jesus is no less present today with us, here and now, than he was in Wittenberg five hundred years ago, or Jerusalem two thousand years ago. Our faith and our Lord are living and active and present, not a historical commemoration. That's why I believe the ministry I was able to serve there, Wittenberg English Ministry, is not just another part of visiting that place but a critically important aspect: you cannot truly appreciate the Reformation without actively worshiping Christ and celebrating the Gospel here and now, in the present, because the essence of the Gospel is that, in Jesus, God is for you. We are not venerating our forebearers in faith; we are standing alongside of them in the same endeavor. We are not going to a museum about faith; we are in the thick of it ourselves!

The more you study Martin Luther, the more you appreciate him as a remarkable individual. As he would be the first to admit, he was a sinner; he was far from perfect. He was a man of extremes, of great passion and energy in both the highs and the lows: when he failed and fell, he could say some spectacularly bad things; yet when he spoke about the Gospel, he had a wonderful way with words in expressing the beauty and clarity of the good news about Christ.

In many ways, he reminds me of King David: another man of extremes, who committed huge and terrible sins yet repented and returned to God, who loved God, praised God, served God. Both Luther and David were musicians and poets, and I think it's especially appropriate to turn to today's Psalm in contemplating the Reformation and our own church and place in the history of God's people. Psalm 46 is the basis for Luther's most famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. It also reminds me of what Jesus says in John chapter 16: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

The Psalm begins with a bold, unambiguous confession of faith. God is our refuge and strength! God is a very present help in trouble! It's a striking statement with an endless amount of confidence in it. Is God readily found in times of trouble? I know there are a lot of people who wonder that. It's a fine statement, sitting here in church, but does it still hold true out there where the rubber meets the road?

I think that's why it's so important to not simply read the Bible but to let the Bible itself preach to us: the Psalmist is not unaware that there are many difficulties and troubles in life, and that in the moment God does not always seem present – but this is not an invitation to debate theology; it is a

call of encouragement, a battlefield speech meant to instill courage and address the fears of people who are in real danger.

You've probably heard the speech given by Winston Churchill in 1940, as Britain faced air attack and possible invasion: "We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender." It does no good to shrug off hardship or pretend it doesn't exist; a good battlefield speech acknowledges difficulty and danger, it acknowledges the reality of fear, but it points to even higher reasons for courage and hope and perseverance even in the face of danger and fear.

And so the Psalm reassures us! There is real danger and hardship in the world; there are things that really do make us afraid, that are threatening and painful. The world is not a place of only sunshine and roses. Yet, God IS our refuge and strength, in the midst of many dangers. God IS present and helping us, even when we don't perceive it. And this is true even when the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the sea - this is true even when terrifying things are happening, even when the world itself is falling apart! Maybe you feel, or have felt in the past, like your world is falling apart. The things around us, the news always harping on the bad in the world, or closer to home in our families and friends and the frailty of our own bodies. But even when the world is falling apart, even in danger and fear both physical and spiritual, God is our mighty fortress.

Going on in the Psalm, we have a description of this: "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns... The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress." The city of God, Jerusalem - now if you don't know the geography of Jerusalem, there is no river there. It's up on a hill, among mountains; there are springs that provide water, but certainly no river. What this language does remind us about seems to be the Garden of Eden, the description of a river dividing and its streams watering the land of God. Even in the midst of raging seas and falling mountains, there is tranquility to be found with God. The Psalm brings together these two places, Eden and Jerusalem, these places where God is found with His people: He walks with them in Eden, and He is present in their midst at the seat of mercy in His Temple.

"The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts," the Psalm says. Inside the reign of God, there is stability; outside, there is nothing but chaos and destruction, whether it's the created world itself or the world that human beings seek to create for themselves, all of their kingdoms and nations, their pretensions at power and attempts to redefine reality against what God has already established. But there is no refuge and no peace apart from the presence and the kingdom of God.

Looking beyond the scope of the Old Testament, we know the way even better and closer and merciful that God is present with us now. Just like in Eden, He walked among us His people in Galilee. Just like in the Temple, He establishes His mercy for all who will come to Him, the forgiveness and restoration and wholeness that are given in Christ. Here today, Christ is present in Word and Sacrament, present for you in grace and mercy to be received by faith.

It's easy to say all of this from a church pew. God is a strong refuge, God is present and helping, God is readily found. We will not fear no matter what happens, whether kingdoms and nations of man rage against us or the world itself falls apart around us. It's easy to say here. But in our most desperate times and deepest needs, where is God when you need Him most? The Psalm points us to Jerusalem as the place of the Temple and therefore the place of God's gracious and merciful presence.

And we know what the Temple is really all about: in the Gospel, Jesus calls himself the Temple. He is the presence and the mercy of God in the middle of his people: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up again in three days," and he did when the Temple of God was nailed to a cross

and laid in a tomb, then three days later was raised back up and restored in the Resurrection. The Temple was always meant to point us to something better and more lasting: not a building that can and was destroyed, but a Lord who became flesh and made his dwelling among us, showing us his true glory, full of grace and truth.

In Jesus, God is present for his people. He is a help that is readily found. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, raised the dead as the beginning of restoring creation to what God intended in Eden. He is the source of living water, the river whose streams make glad the people of God, the Holy Spirit which gladdens and strengthens our hearts. Like the Temple itself, the “city of God” is not a place but a people; the people of God by new birth in Christ throughout the world. He is no less present and active with us now than at Wittenberg five centuries or Jerusalem twenty centuries ago.

That was the point of the Reformation, this living and active trust in the Lord Jesus. This bold, courageous proclamation of faith is meant to comfort: “God is my refuge and strength! God is my mighty fortress!” Luther penned his most famous hymn in a time when the world seemed to be falling apart: an epidemic of plague hit Wittenberg, Muslim Turkish armies were pushing deeper into Europe, and the Church itself was splintering apart. There was real danger and real fear. But as he wrote, “Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child, or spouse, though life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day. The kingdom’s ours forever!” We may lose it all in a worldly perspective: home and family, reputation, career, life itself. The world can take those away, but it cannot take away what really matters: the victory and the kingdom of Christ, who promises us eternity. By grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Lord’s Prayer

**Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven;
give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

**For Thine is the kingdom
and the power and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.**

P: Almighty and gracious Lord, pour out Your Holy Spirit on Your faithful people. Keep us steadfast in Your grace and truth, protect and deliver us in times of temptation, defend us against all enemies, and grant to Your Church Your saving peace; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

C: **Amen.**

P: Let us bless the Lord!

C: **Thanks be to God!**

P: The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.

C: **Amen.**