

REFORMATION SUNDAY

October 30, 2016

*Psalm 46:1-7: **"The Weak Man Behind a Mighty Fortress"***

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Avenue
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In 1993, Mark Galli, the associate editor of *Christian History*, wrote an article titled "The Weak Man Behind a Mighty Fortress" - the title of which I have also chosen to serve as the theme for our message this morning. In the article, Galli relates the story behind: "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Since this famous hymn was written during the tenth-year anniversary of the posting of the ninety-five theses in 1517, it is considered to be the hymn of the Reformation. However, there is much more to the story that even most Lutherans do not know.

1527, the year in which the hymn was written, was one of the most trying years of Luther's life. It is therefore hard to imagine that he had the energy or spirit to compose such a powerful and lasting hymn. On April 22, a dizzy spell forced Luther to stop preaching in the middle of his sermon. For ten years he had been living in a nightmare of political and theological upheaval under the papacy and Roman Catholic Church. Now he found himself battling other so-called "reformers" over the meaning of the Lord's Supper. To Luther, this battle over the body and blood of Christ was just as much of an assault on Jesus as saying that "good works save us." He was deeply disturbed by the whole thing and battled intense depression.

On July 6, as friends arrived for dinner, Luther felt an intense buzzing in his left ear. He went to lie down when suddenly he cried out, "Water . . . or I'll die!" He became cold, and he was convinced that he had seen his last night. However, with a doctor's help, Luther partially regained his strength. But his spiritual struggles and physical illness overcame him again in August, September, and late December. During this time, he wrote to his friend Phillip Melancthon: "I spent more than a week in death and hell. My entire body was in pain, and I still tremble. Completely abandoned by Christ, I labored under the vacillations and storms of desperation and blasphemy against God. But through the prayers of the saints [his friends], God began to have mercy on me and pulled my soul from the inferno below."

Finally, it was also during this time that the plague had erupted in his town of Wittenberg. People fled the city, but Luther remained with his family and cared for the sick. Even though his wife was pregnant, his home was transformed into a hospital and he watch many of his friends die. His own son became ill. At the end of November, the plague finally began to diminish and the ill began to recover. Noting the deeper meaning of his trials, Luther wrote: "The only comfort against raging Satan is that we have God's Word to save the souls of believers." Sometime during 1527, Luther expanded that thought and wrote "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

Luther . . . **The Weak Man Behind a Mighty Fortress.** We hardly think of Luther as weak, but that is exactly how he saw himself - weak and a beggar before God in heaven. Our theme paints a vivid picture in the mind. I see this weak, beggar of a man - a nothing in the eyes of those who think they are something - peering through a block-stone window in a heavily protected and impenetrable building. That building is a mighty fortress, a stronghold who is God himself, and if any would dare to try and conquer this weak, beggar of a man, they are going to have to break through God and defeat him first. And the weak man behind the fortress is shaking to his knees as he looks out of that block-stone window because he sees the forces that are marshaled against him. He feels completely abandoned by Christ.

There are those moments in the Christian life when it feels as if Christ is far away or not there at all. We look out of the block-stone window and it seems as if we are utterly surrounded by a long list of troubles, calamities, and a host of enemies. All we can see is everything through the window and that which is on the outside - all the trouble, calamities, and enemies - and we forget that above and below and to the right and to the left there is a fortress that surrounds and gives us refuge. Shaking to our knees, we sometimes wonder how we are going to make it through another day. We plead with God to remove all that threatens us, and we find ourselves like Luther, "laboring under the vacillations and storms of desperation and blasphemy against God." Here we must confess our sins and receive forgiveness.

Still, we are not alone in these types of feelings. This kind of thing is found among even strong Christians. I want you to listen very carefully to these words of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10:

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.

Do we really need to know the details of the affliction in which Paul and his companions experienced? Not at all. The point is that they were burdened beyond their strength. They despaired of life itself. They felt the sentence of death. But, Paul makes it perfectly clear that these things were allowed in their lives to make them not rely on themselves, but to trust and cling to God who is the only one who can deliver us from every burden, relieve us from despair, and remove the sentence of death by raising us from the dead. We are to hold onto God even if it appears that he is the one out to get us. And, as we are taught to trust in him no matter what, we are made ready for our departure from this world and emboldened to even face God in the day of judgment.

You may ask, "how can anyone of us hold onto God even when it appears that he is the one who is out to get us?" Whenever we have such feelings, we are bid to look to the cross and to the sufferings and death of Jesus, for it is there that we see nothing but love and the destination that God has in mind for us. Our destination is to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil. God raises the dead. Jesus rose from the dead. And if we feel the sentence of death and even die with him to all that is down here in this messed up passing away place, then we will also rise with him and have all that is good. He delivers us! Therefore, like Paul and his companions, we set our hope on Jesus. That means that we are certain that the outcome will be favorable to us, even when everything down here appears to be nothing but bad. In such hope we joyfully anticipate that we will make it through it all and reach the final goal in which God has in mind for us. This joyful anticipation causes us to tenaciously persevere under . . . you name it!

Again Luther: "the only comfort against the raging of Satan is that we have God's Word to save the souls of believers." God's Word is Jesus and the forgiveness of sins. "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" was composed by a very weak Martin Luther. He was inspired to compose the hymn after reading Psalm 46. He read the words and heard the invitation to hope when everything seems to be hopeless - to hold on even

when the trouble, calamities, and enemies become so numerous that they all appear to be insurmountable. The psalm reads:

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 (Psalm 46:1-7).

Powerful words! When all appears to be lost, everything is in God our refuge and strength. All of us are weak people behind a mighty fortress! The Lord of hosts is with us. He is not the source of trouble, calamities, and enemies. But, he will use them to make us not rely upon ourselves and to keep our eyes on him. He will use such things to keep us on the road to heaven. The Word of God makes us alive and keeps us walking on the path. God is in our midst. The church will not be moved. Our God helps us. Whenever we find ourselves gazing too long out the window, weakened by the troubles, calamities, and enemies around us, we should look to see that the God of Jacob is our fortress. Our champion is Jesus Christ. Our victory has been won. The kingdom remains forever. And no one or no thing can take the kingdom away!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott