

## A Mighty Fortress is Our God

Sermon for Reformation Day

Sermon Text: 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 gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, <sup>3</sup> though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. <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 her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. <sup>6</sup> The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; He utters His voice, the earth melts. <sup>7</sup> The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. <sup>8</sup> Come, behold the works of the Lord, how He has brought desolations on the earth. <sup>9</sup> He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and shatters the spear; He burns the chariots with fire. <sup>10</sup> "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" <sup>11</sup> The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.*

The most used word of our time is surely "protection." We heard again and again in the last few years about vaccine protection. Then about the protection of Ukrainians in the cellars and bunkers while bombs fell. And last but not least, this word has a new meaning for us here in Germany because we are all afraid that tactical nuclear weapons could also be used against us. Meanwhile, we know that many people here and now can find no protection at all. Students and young women are left to die in a hail of bullets from Iranian police. Some are arrested and subjected to police brutality without legal protection. Even at Evin Prison (Tehran, Iran), they did not shy away from burning the prisoners. What are we to do about the violence? Unfortunately, the harsh reality of the current situation shows that the only way to protect yourself from violence is to use violence yourself. Only war can prevent war, and violence with even stronger violence! Consequently, people are in a spiral that becomes more and more threatening and dangerous. Day to day, we hear the following report: "This is another escalation!" And what are we to do against such endless violence? A Ukrainian soldier said to a journalist: "We don't need your prayers. We need your weapons!"

When Martin Luther wrote the hymn "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," he didn't have earthly weapons in mind, but God and His protection. He based his writing of the hymn on Psalm 46, which we just read. Psalm 46 talks of dangerous wars even then. And not only about that, it also talks about the foundations of the world being shaken. With this, the Psalm speaks to our hearts as well because we all know this same fear! Fear of war; fear of failure, fear of illness. Fear belongs to us! It is a part of being human. And that's why we try as much as we can to protect ourselves from dangerous things. At the time Psalm 46 was written, it was thought that the city of Jerusalem was such a strong and secure fortress where one could find shelter. Martin Luther also had the dangerous political disputes of his time in mind when he wrote this hymn. Yet, he saw behind these powers an evil spiritual power that wants to bring chaos into the whole world. I think that this idea is very important for people today too. Even when we have to deal with earthly foes, the actual enemy is Satan. In the actual sense, our enemies are not the mullahs or Putins of the world. The danger is behind them. The true danger is the evil that influences all these people. Satan is the origin of all evil. And furthermore, it is necessary to understand that we can do nothing against such enemies with our weapons and power. God Himself is our fortress. And God Himself is a trusty shield and weapon. Under God's wings, we can defend ourselves from the chaos of this world. And so, Luther has us sing:

*A mighty fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon;  
He helps us free from ev'ry need that hath us now o'ertaken.  
The old evil foe now means deadly woe;*

*deep guile and great might are his dread arms in fight;  
on earth is not his equal.*

Luther himself experienced external threats on his life. When Luther stood before the pope to defend his teaching, it was clear to all that he had no chance against the power of the ecclesiastic state. He would have to give in and have his teachings renounced or burned. When Luther said his famous words: “Here I stand and I can do no other”, at that, it was a declaration of war from a dwarf against a giant since he didn’t want to renounce his teaching. And immediately, Luther had to be taken to safety where he was under the protection of the elector of Saxony for a very long time. So, Luther could understand very well what threat and protection mean. Yet he didn’t base his hymn “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” on his personal fate. He doesn’t say a word about this fate in his song. Luther was convinced that the determining battle was already won long before him. That was Jesus Christ’s battle against sin, death, and the devil. And so, Martin Luther continues to sing:

*With might of ours can naught be done, soon were our loss effected;  
But for us fights the valiant One, whom God Himself elected.  
Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is,  
Of Sabaoth Lord, and there’s none other God;  
He holds the field forever.*

The whole song is about this Jesus Christ, and it wants to encourage us in the conflict against Satan to seek protection in Christ alone. For this reason, this hymn was often sung on the third Sunday in Lent. By doing this, it was intended to prepare people against Satan’s attacks. And the only place where you can prepare for these attacks in the right way is under the protection of Jesus Christ.

And yet, Martin Luther knew that evil was not to be dismissed lightly. Even Martin Luther himself suffered many doubts and not only such doubts but he also suffered physically from illness and lost family members to death. Again and again, he asked himself: “Can I remain standing before God? Am I righteous before Him?” This is what happened to Martin Luther when he came across the word “righteousness” while reading the Letter to the Romans. He had always thought that righteousness is something that people do. And only upon reading the Letter to the Romans did he discover that righteousness is not a measuring stick against which one should measure their good deeds. Rather, it is a condition that God attributes to us through Christ... simply because of God’s grace and mercy. And so, Martin Luther has us sing:

*Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us,  
We tremble not, we fear no ill; they shall not overpow’r us.  
This world’s prince may still scowl fierce as he will,  
He can harm us none. He’s judged; the deed is done;  
One little word can fell him.*

It is good for us to look for these things in remembrance. In times of need and fear, we should remind ourselves and our world that evil has a source. At the same time, we should rip open the church doors and allow people to seek protection here and to pray. We should also proclaim to all the people in Iran, in Ukraine, in Yemen, and in many other countries that God reigns over all things despite everything. We don’t need to judge. God alone is the judge. All we need to do is trust. And that’s why we can sing together with all the people in this world: “A mighty fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon!” That is the best service of peace we, as the church, can offer. Amen.