Reformation

October 25, 2020

Psalm 46

Every year, the final Sunday of October is set aside to commemorate the Reformation, to remember that we are always growing in how we understand God, and that the church is always in need of reforming.

Tradition holds that Martin Luther, a monk and professor, posted the 95 points of his argument against the efficacy of indulgences on the door of his church, thus sparking the Reformation.

While it may be difficult to separate truth from legend when it comes to certain parts of the story of Luther’s life, we know from his own writings that he knew a thing or two about tumultuous times. As a monk, he struggled with doubt. He once described his time living in a monastery by saying, “I lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made of him the jailer and hangman of my poor soul.”

We do Luther a disservice if we neglect to consider the effect that the Reformation had on him. Excommunicated by the Pope, he was denied the ability to participate in the life of the Church he hoped to see reformed. His life was in danger on multiple occasions, leading him to live in hiding for some time.

Even things like his choice to marry would not have been easy. It was as clear a challenge of a teaching of the Church as his arguments against indulgences or in support of justification by grace through faith.

No doubt he struggled, perhaps occasionally wondered if his efforts were worth the difficulties he suffered.

Luther sought comfort in Scripture. He found it in today’s text from Romans, but he also found it in our Psalm, which became the foundation for the most famous of his hymns, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.”

Both Psalm 46 and Luther’s hymn are confessional statements, declaring trust in God in the presence of chaos and destructive forces. They “celebrate the confidence that the people of God may have in God’s help” because God chooses to be with them.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Psalm 46 speaks to holding onto our faith during difficult times. Verses 1 to 3 tell of the power of nature with words that remind us of the creation story in Genesis 1. There, we hear that in the beginning God spoke and order was formed out of chaos. Here, the waters rage and foam, the mountains tremble, as if chaos threatens to overtake God’s good creation.

But even in the midst of the chaos, the Psalmist confidently declares, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

In verses 4 to 6, I t’s not the waters and the mountains that rage, but the nations and the kingdoms. The people of God are in danger because the greed and ego and vanity of those in power created instability and chaos.

Notice that water is mentioned in both verses 3 and 4. In verse 3, the waters rage and foam. They’re full of danger.

But in verse 4, the waters form a stream that makes “glad the city of God.” A stream that provides for a people who live in an arid location. Because of God’s presence among them, they would know abundance and an end to chaos. In an echo of Genesis 1, God again speaks and all chaos ceases.

And then the world is instructed to be quiet so all can “regard the works of the Lord,” so all can see what God has done.

What God has done is to make wars cease, break the bow, shatter the spear, and burn up the shields. Not that these things had happened, but rather the Psalm carries the promise that they *would* happen one day, because God “will be exalted among the nations” and “exalted in the earth.” Once again, and for all time, God will bring order out of chaos.

Luther took these words of hope and applied them to the chaos of his own times, used language that his people understood, and rooted the message of trust in God not just in the God of Jacob, but also in Christ.

He wrote, “We sing this psalm to the praise of God, because He is with us and powerfully and miraculously preserves and defends His church and His word against all fanatical spirits, against the gates of hell, against the implacable hatred of the devil, and against all the assaults of the world, the flesh, and sin.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Luther acknowledged what the Psalmist knew: trusting in God does not mean an absence of difficulty in our lives, but the constant presence of God with us when we are dealing with it, and the promise that, one day, God’s reign will be known by all on earth.

We confess faith in the promise that, through his death and resurrection, Jesus defeated the forces of evil and death, that God will prevail.

But when we look around, we find lots of reasons to be worried.

It might be helpful to keep in mind, though, that several studies have shown that our brains are actually more sensitive to, and receptive of, unpleasant news than good news.

That’s why it’s so much easier for us to remember all the mean things people say about us, to think that everything in the world is going from bad to worse, to think there’s no reason for hope.

One positive bit of news doesn’t cancel out one negative bit. Instead, it can take 5 or 6 or 7 positive things to cancel out one bad thing.

And that’s when we’re not living through a global pandemic.

This is why we need to cling to the hopes of this Psalm, of Luther’s hymn. Because, really, they express the hopes of the entire Bible. God, who created all that is, has not and will not abandon us. As John the Evangelist reminds us, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not, will not, overcome it.

Faith has the power to make us unafraid. “Concern and caution may persist,” but faith in God allows trust in the promises of this Psalm, of Luther’s hymn, of the Bible itself.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We are called to trust in the promise that God is always with us, that our source for hope lies not in earthly powers but in the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all that is.

More than ever, we need this hope. We need the comfort of the promise that there is nothing we can do to make God love us less or to take away our salvation.

Whatever may come, may we find hope and peace in the promise that “The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold.”

1. Psalm 46, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching,* volume *Psalms*, James L. Mays [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Martin Luther, *A Manual of the Book of Psalms, or, the Subject-Contents of All the Psalms*; translated into English by Henry Cole, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Interpretation,* Mays [↑](#footnote-ref-3)