

Our Refuge, Our Strength

Meditation on Psalm 46

Oct. 29, 2017

Reformation Sunday

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

¹ God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; ³ though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. ⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. ⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. ⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD; how he has brought desolations on the earth. ⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. ¹⁰ 'Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.' ¹ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

The rain didn't keep them away. They came last night to our church. Dressed as White Rabbit and Vampires. Red Queen and Football players. Angels and Pirates. Witches and Waldos. That was just some of

the adults who came to our Fall Festival. They came with love and joy to share. They came to bless the children, many of whom attend our preschool. There were skeletons. Bears. Police officers. And many others.

Those who serve the Church, no matter what job they are doing are doing it for the Lord...making hot dogs, decorating cookies, applying temporary tattoos, playing games and doing crafts with little hands. We are the priesthood of *all believers*. The Church today embraces the idea of vocation--that everyone is called to minister with all their gifts, talents and resources in the work God has called them to do. *Ministry* is not just for clergy. But this was not taught by the Church of the Middle Ages. Not until Martin Luther, who thought it was time for the Church to change.

Today is Reformation Sunday, when we remember and give thanks to God for the transformation of the Church that began with a few brave souls, standing up for their convictions. And we pray for the Spirit to give us courage and faith to embrace the changes that God will lead us to in the future. For God's work of sanctification isn't finished in us. We are still being transformed into the Church God wants us to be.

Martin's Reformation story begins at around 2 p.m. on October 31, 1517, on the eve of All Saints Day, when he walked to the main north door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, hammer in hand. In his *Ninety-Five Theses*, Martin protests the Church's practice of selling

certificates called *indulgences*. These papal certificates promised forgiveness for the sins of the buyer and for their loved ones who had died and were waiting in purgatory. The indulgences, in actuality, were a fundraiser for a massive building campaign. Pope Leo X wanted a new basilica in Rome. Luther saw this as an abuse of the Church's power, not just because the Church was stealing money from poor people who could barely afford food to eat, but because freedom from God's punishment for sin could not be bought.

Martin had personally wrestled with the question of God's forgiveness for years, asking himself, "Am I good enough?" Studying Paul's letter to the Romans led him to an answer that truly changed everything for him. He was saved by faith in the righteousness of God, not by any good deeds he could do. Paul writes in Romans 1:16-17, ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation *to everyone who has faith*, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the *righteousness of God* is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

Before Luther, a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg, posted his protest on the church door, no one in the Church had publicly challenged the authority and office of the pope. Luther's writings, many of them scathing criticisms of the Church, were meant for the masses; they were published in German, the language of the people, and distributed across Europe through modern printing technology. Summoned to appear before Pope Leo X and the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1521, Martin refused to recant his views. He said, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain

reason -- I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other -- my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen." The printed document released afterward also contained the famous words, "Here I stand, I can do no other."

Pope Leo X condemned him as a heretic and excommunicated him from the church, but he had some support amongst the German princes. Frederick the Wise of Saxony staged a "kidnapping" and took Martin to Wartburg castle, where he hid for 10 months, during which time Martin grew a beard and took on an assumed name. More importantly, he translated the New Testament, formerly only in Latin, into German. Later, he would translate the entire Bible, with help from others. Now, the people could read and understand Scripture for themselves--and know the gospel of grace.

Historians now say that Martin's radical ideas for the Middle Ages, were not so radical, after all, considering the changing political, social, technical, and educational climate of his day. Humanists, artists and poets of the Renaissance offered the poor and oppressed new understandings for human existence and spiritual truth. Copernicus redefined the earth's position in the universe. Columbus landed in the New World. Da Vinci's contributions to art and science are too numerous to name. But struggling peasants made up 90 percent of the population, with most of the wealth and land held by the nobility and the church! It was time for change!

Luther's additional contributions to the church included creating a catechism to empower parents to teach their children the faith at home. In worship, Scripture was read, sermons were preached and songs were sung in German, where formerly all had been Latin. At last, people could learn how they may apply God's Word to their daily lives. Luther also composed 36 hymns, the most popular of which is, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." Historians don't know when Luther wrote it, but some think it may have been written in Oct. 1527 as the plague was approaching. It became the battle hymn of the Protestant Reformation, sung in churches, in the streets, and by martyrs as they went to their death.

The hymn is based on Psalm 46, a celebration of God's sovereignty, in an unstable, dangerous world that nevertheless still belongs to him. He is the divine warrior, the Lord of Hosts of Heavenly beings who battle against cosmic and human foes to maintain his rule. We need not fear, for we trust in Him. The City of God will not be shaken. Our God has chosen to be with us, in relationship with us, if only we would be still....and know our God. Our home is not in a place. Our home is dwelling with God; he alone is our refuge. But this is a God of power and might, who "has brought desolations on the earth." Yet God's desire is for wars to end; he "breaks the bow, shatters the spear; burns the shields with fire." This hymn carries a promise of peace, in that day of God's choosing. He is exalted among the nations. Exalted in the earth.

The hymn became closely associated with Luther and seemed, historian Louis Benton says, to embody his character--"bold, confident, defiant in the face of opposition." The English version we know was

written in the 19th century by a New England Unitarian minister and Transcendentalist, Frederic Henry Hedge:

“A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing; Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing: For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe; His craft and pow’r are great, and, armed with cruel hate, On earth is not his equal.

“Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing. Were not the right Man on our side, The Man of God’s own choosing. Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He; Lord Sabaoth is His name, from age to age the same. And He must win the battle.

“And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us; The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him; His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure, One little word shall fell him.

“That word above all earthly pow’rs, no thanks to them, abideth; The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us sideth; Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; The body they may kill: God’s truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever.”

Let us pray....

Holy One, we thank you for your patience with your Church and your faithfulness to continually work in us to reform, remake and transform us. Remove all fear and doubt from us. We give ourselves to you for we

belong to you. We offer all we are now, all that we have, and all that we will become. Help us to be obedient to your call to every person to serve you and the church through our labors. Give us hearts to give so that you may minister through us in this place for generations to come. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.