

“HERE I STAND”

Psalm 46

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed ninety-five theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. At that time, that church door served as a community bulletin board. Along with Luther’s theses, the door may have held announcements for special events, political concerns, job openings, rooms for rent, and rewards for lost pets.

In posting his ninety-five theses, Luther’s intent was not to incite a rebellion or even to launch a Lutheran reformation; rather, to start a theological debate about doctrinal abuses within the Roman Catholic Church. To that end, Luther wrote the ninety-five theses in Latin, a language understood by the clergy and scholarly, but not by the German laity; and therefore not meant for mass consumption.

In fact, Luther prefaced his theses with the words: “Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it, the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology, and ordinary lecturer therein at Wittenberg, intends to defend the following statements and to dispute on them in that place. Therefore he asks that those who cannot be present and dispute with him orally shall do so in their absence by letter.”

When Luther wrote the Ninety-Five Theses, he was thirty-four years old; a Doctor of Theology; a devout Catholic; and a parish priest increasingly concerned about the sale of indulgences. Indulgences were papal certificates offering forgiveness and release from the agonies of Purgatory—for a price.

At the direction of Pope Leo X, men like John Tetzel, a Dominican monk, traveled from town to town, peddling forgiveness like Tupperware, while leveraging the fears and tears of those who had lost loved ones. and imagined them burning in the purifying flames of Purgatory. “Listen to the voices of your dear dead relatives and friends,” Tetzel said, “beseeching you and saying, ‘Pity us, pity us. We are in dire torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance.’ ” Tetzel concluded his sales pitch with the jingle: “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs.”

By nailing the Ninety-Five These to the door of Castle Church, Luther sought a debate. God, however, had much bigger plans. In leading Luther to a true understanding of the Gospel; namely, that salvation is obtained through faith in Jesus Christ alone, not by human works; and in teaching Luther that Scripture is absolute truth and the supreme authority, not the whims and dictates of the Roman pope; God also restored the Gospel to the Christian Church. Eventually, the hammer blows heard in Wittenberg on October

31, 1517, resounded around the world.

Much of Luther's life and subsequent ministry were carried out amid upheaval and severe opposition. Political turmoil in Europe. Corruption within the Catholic Church. Persecution by church and state. The threat of imprisonment and death. The lingering aftermath of the Bubonic Plague, which two centuries earlier had killed an estimated fifty million Europeans. The conquests of the Islamic Turks. Certainly the tumultuous highs and lows of Luther's personal life—his frequent bouts of depression; his early struggle to find peace with God on the basis of his own works and merit.

Yet, amid all these perils, Luther found strength and refuge in Almighty God. During the Diet of Worms in 1521, when standing before Emperor Charles, Prosecutor Eck, German princes, a host of friends of foes; and then ordered to recant his books, his Ninety-Five Theses, and his accusations against the papacy, Luther replied with the familiar words: “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 will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”

“Here I stand.” And that which enabled Luther to stand so steadfastly was his reliance on God's grace, God's power, God's presence, and God's Word. Not surprisingly, Psalm 46 was one of Luther's favorite psalms: **“God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble.”** Amid his own troubles, Luther often told his friend and coworker Philipp Melancthon: ‘Philipp, let's sing the forty-sixth psalm.’ And it was Luther, of course, who set Psalm 46 to music in his great Reformation hymn *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott*; that is, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.

Therefore, Psalm 46 is not only a fitting psalm with which to commemorate the Reformation; it is also a fitting psalm for our own lives, our own times, and our own troubles. With God as our refuge and strength, we too may boldly say with Luther: “Here I stand.” How? Psalm 46 provides three important reasons: God is all-powerful; God is personally involved and willing to help; and God is in complete control.

First, God is all-powerful. “**God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling. Selah,**” Psalm 46:1-3. The word SELAH at the end of verse 3—and for that matter, also verse 7 and verse 11—is of Hebrew origin and means to pause, rest, be silent. Why? In order to reflect carefully on what God is telling us.

What is God telling us in this first section of Psalm 46? The picture in these verses is one of utter chaos and upheaval. The earth removed. The mountains hurled into the depths of the oceans. Surging, foaming floods. Devastating earthquakes. And it really doesn't matter whether the picture is literal, that is, natural disasters or even the destruction to befall the earth and universe at the end of time; or whether the images in Psalm 46:1-3 are symbolic of the chaos and upheaval in our personal lives. It doesn't matter, because both are true and both will happen.

The Hebrew word translated as "removed" in Psalm 46:2 literally means "to change". *Though the earth be changed.* And what causes more fear and uncertainty in our lives than the prospect of change? Think of the dramatic changes in the life of Martin Luther. A change in careers. Originally, Luther intended to become a lawyer, then swore to become a monk when a bolt of lightning knocked him to the ground outside the village of Stotternheim, on July 2, 1505. In desperation he cried out, "St. Anne, help me, and I will become a monk." Two weeks later he entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt.

Or consider the changes in Luther's relationship with the Roman Catholic Church: once adhering to its teachings, then denouncing its teachings; once reverencing the pope, then labeling the pope the Antichrist; once a Doctor of Theology in the Catholic Church, then excommunicated for his theology by the Catholic Church; once slavishly pursuing salvation by works, then rejoicing in the full and free salvation obtained for humanity through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Amid all these changes, Martin Luther understood: **"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."**

Our lives are constantly changing too. And it is the changeability of our lives that frightens us. We never expect to trade the vigor of youth for the aches, pains, and prescriptions of old age. We never expect to lose that job; go through that divorce; file that bankruptcy; hear that diagnosis; or lose that beloved spouse. But these things, these types of changes, happen. As my great grandmother often sighed and said: 'So geht ist in demn wald'—German for 'So goes it in the world.'

Yet, amid all these changes, the Bible comforts us with the reality that our God, our refuge and strength, *never* changes. **"I the LORD do not change,"** Malachi 3:6. **"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,"** Hebrews 13:8. And whatever our present circumstances, this same unchanging God is **"a very present help in trouble"**. A more literal translation of the Hebrew is 'God is always found to be a present help in trouble.' Always found, and therefore tried, tested, and proven to be faithful and true.

Friends, if you reflect on your own life, the good times and the bad times, can you honestly recall a single instance in which God was not a present help? I can't. In fact, had Almighty God not been a present help through all the changes of my life, I would not be standing in this pulpit today. But God was present each time I turned to Him. God was still present each time I turned away from Him. Can the same be said of anyone or anything else? No. This is why the first word of Psalm 46 is one of its most important words: **"GOD is our refuge and strength."** God. Not money. Not philosophy. Not science. Not governments, rulers, or politicians. Not Oprah.

God. The Hebrew word for God in Psalm 46:1, ELOHIM, is the same word for God used in Genesis 1:1. **"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."** Imagine the power of God exerted in creation, when He spoke the entire universe into existence—vast distances of space, matter, energy, and celestial bodies that we cannot even measure much less begin to comprehend. **"Let there be,"** said God. **"And there was."** Instantly. Perfectly. Something from nothing. ELOHIM is actually a plural word; not in the sense of many gods, but in the sense of infinite fullness. Fullness of power. Fullness of knowledge. Fullness of blessings. Fullness of presence. Fullness of grace.

This is why Luther could say, "Here I stand." This is why, God is why, you and I can confidently say, **"Therefore, we will not fear."** We will not fear sickness. We will not fear growing old. We will not fear loneliness or death. We will not fear economic downturns, terrorist attacks, raging nations, falling mountains, swelling seas, or the changeability of life itself.

Second, God is personally involved and willing to help. **"There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved. God shall help her, just at the break of dawn. The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved. He uttered His voice, the earth melted. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah,"** Psalm 146:4-7.

If the first section of Psalm 46 assures us of God's power at work in our lives, then the second section assures us of God's personal involvement in our lives. And both of these great realities—God's power and personal involvement—are combined in verses 7 and 11: **"The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge."** Notice. Here God is not only called the LORD of hosts; He is also called the God of Jacob.

Isn't that amazing? Isn't that comforting? The omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God; the Creator of the universe; the One of whom Paul exulted in Romans 11, saying, **"Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!"**

How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out!—this God not only identifies Himself as the LORD of vast armies, but as the God of a single individual. In this instance, the God of the patriarch Jacob.

In this congregation, as well as every other congregation I've served, someone, at some time, following a worship service, has said: "Pastor, thank you for the sermon. The words were just what I needed. It's almost as if you wrote the sermon for me." Generally, my response has been: "I'm so grateful that you found the sermon encouraging and relevant to your needs. But that was God's doing; not mine. He knew exactly what you needed to hear."

In fact, recently I received a heartwarming email from one of the people to whom I send Sunday sermons. The email read: "Every week I look forward to logging into my email during break-time at work and seeing your sermon. So many times it seems that the message is direct from God to me. It's more of a comfort to know that God sends these words to me exactly at the time I need them most, without me realizing it until I read them."

God does send the right words and the right help at just the right time; or, in the poetic words of Psalm 46, "**just at the break of dawn.**" First thing. Top priority. When you and I feel alone, adrift, unwanted, unloved, may we remember the words of this psalm and stand firm against all opposition. God is not only the LORD of armies. He is not only the God of Jacob. He is the God of every one of you sitting in these pews, and personally involved in your life.

"**God is in the midst of her,**" wrote the psalmist. In the midst of His people. In the midst of His beloved Church. In the midst of this congregation since its founding in 1909. "**For where two or three are gathered together in My name,**" said Jesus, "**I am there in the midst of them.**" Indeed, God in our midst is the very essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul saw the sacrifice of Jesus as the indisputable evidence that God is personally involved in our lives, writing in Romans 8: "**What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?**" And if you believe this, dear friend, as Martin Luther believed it, nothing will move you either. Not sickness. Not pain. Not loss, life, death, or the gates of hell itself. You will not be moved. You will say, "Here I stand."

Luther wrote this of God's willingness to help: "If you have a true faith that Christ is your Savior, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love."

That which the psalmist meant in Psalm 46 b7 the image of **“a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God.”** Flowing, limitless grace. “This is it,” said Luther, “to behold God in faith that you should look upon His fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger or ungraciousness.”

Finally, God is in complete control. **“Come, behold the works of the LORD, who has made desolations in the earth. He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the 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 refuge. Selah,”** Psalm 46:8-11.

Much could be stated about these verses. In an age of wars, terrorist attacks, the swaggering and boasting of nations and their leaders; inept politicians, impeachment proceedings, and dire warnings of global warming—how comforting to remember that God Almighty is in control; that He, not rulers or diplomats, **“makes wars to cease; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the fire,”** Psalm 46:9.

Yet, as we close this morning; as we commemorate the Lutheran reformation while lamenting the sad state of modern Lutheranism in America and elsewhere; as we ponder our personal pains and problems; I direct your attention to the words of Psalm 46:10. For in this verse, God Himself turns to us directly and says: **“Be still and know that I am God.”**

When we find ourselves overloaded with problems and overwhelmed by worries, God doesn’t say “hurry up, pick up the pace, run twice as fast.” No, God says, **“Be still and know that I am God.”** And this, my dear friends, is the type of SELAH, the contemplative silence and reflection that we need the most. Be still. Stop fidgeting. Stop worrying. Stop talking. And start listening. **“God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear.”**

Know this and believe this, and you too will say this: “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”