

**Hebrew Testament—Psalm 46**  
**New Testament—Luke 9: 23-26**

*word count: 2,067*

Gifted flute and lute player as well as brilliant theologian, Martin Luther wrote both the melody and the words to *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* in 1529. Centuries later, a Jewish German poet named Heinrich Heine was to call, “Eine Feste Burg,” *A Mighty Fortress*, the Marseilles of the Reformation. It was a good description, because it became an inspiration to German Lutherans, and a tower of strength to Swedish soldiers and French Huguenot martyrs, many of whom died with the hymn on their lips. In 1531, the hymn was sung by the entire army of Gustavus Adolphus before the battle of Leipzig. Its melody forms the central theme to Meyerbeer’s *The Huguenots*, Mendelsohn used it in his *Reformation Symphony*, Wagner and Pachelbel borrowed it, and so did Bach in his sacred cantatas.

One critic noted, “The hymn is not artistic, but rugged and strong, like Luther himself, whose very words seem like deeds.” Everyone knows that Luther helped start the Reformation. What few know is that he started a “hymnody” by writing hymns in the vernacular for *all* the people to sing, which was unheard of at that time. In contrast, the Calvinist churches in England, Scotland, and New England rejected any hymn that was, as they said, “of human composure,” allowing their congregations to sing, “only biblical psalms made metrical.”

Luther used the 46<sup>th</sup> psalm, which we have just heard, as a primary source of inspiration; “God is our refuge and our strength.” This is the psalm that I turn to when I feel that the ground beneath me has been shaken, such as I (and I know many of you share this feeling) have felt this week when I see how quickly danger can come down close to us and threaten everything and everyone we know. We experience danger close up in human acts of terrorism, the disasters of war and mismanagement of resources, and in the sudden fury of nature that comes from time to time in earthquakes and these fires that have now displaced so many people. The 46<sup>th</sup> psalm speaks to the personal strength inherent in its words that it gives us power in times of trouble.

Martin Luther, stirring up discord with the church, knew about the need for quiet strength in times of trouble. When Luther begins he is saying, “A mighty fortress is our God, not the pope, not the church, not the nation, not power, not even individual conscience; because my conscience must be captive to what I understand that a higher power is calling me to be.”

“A mighty fortress is our God a bulwark never failing.” In other words, if we believe that one God is sovereign over every nation, and this Creative Force alone is what holds us all together, then any fortresses we build against each other are counterproductive at best.

“Our present help amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.” God does not keep us *out* of trouble, Luther is saying, but supports us *in* the flood of mortal ills that threaten to undo us. If your security is in the *Absolute*, then you can, no you *must* take off all this-world insecurities.

“For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe, his craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate, on earth without an equal.” Here is the line that makes us want to smack our hymnals shut and roll our eyes. Perhaps people were right in the pre-scientific world to personify evil. Evil *should* be personified imaginatively if we experience it as a power working against us as a people; the corporate structures today that split and subdue our spirits and tear at our sense of world security. If evil arises within us, we experience it as something stronger than us, and we allow it to rise and overtake us.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear Jesus saying, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." Who stands out in the smoke-diffused light of this week as living closest to those words? What happened to us as a community this week and how well were we lead?

Into this present day, a day after day full of smolder and fury, comes the kind of scenario of danger, fear and concern that brings people to call upon the source of their refuge of strength, as they seek their inner resources in response to the many fires that surround our communities all over Southern California this week. At the church, phone calls and e-mails were coming in and going out—"Who in our congregation lives close to the fires?" "Have you heard from so-and-so?" At our bible study, a prepared meal was brought in exchange for the answer to the question, "Tell us about your evacuation—is everything all right?"

We watched our leaders orchestrate a response far greater than what we saw during Hurricane Katrina. In every news story that showed a blaze of flame, there was the silhouette of a firefighter's hat, or the reflection of the yellow reflective tape on a fire-retardant uniform worn by those who willingly choose to take up their own metaphoric cross and are willing to lose their own lives to save others.

From these heroic people, our firefighters still at work today, came the stories that made us feel differently about our sense of undivided community; they lifted spirits, gave hope, and showed that the gospel can be done after all, whether it was being performed by Christians or not. Here was the man who worked with a crew to save a neighbor's house while he watched his own burn. There were the family pictures in frames held up for the cameras by people who returned to destroyed homes, but found that the firefighters had gone into the conflagration for one brief moment to save something that might be the seed for starting over. Here was the firefighter who had been working for four days in a row in disbelief as he sat in the grass next to the President of the United States.

Care and hope, given back to us. The idea of extending ourselves unconditionally unifies us briefly into a whole again, away from the ideologues whose fortresses of words and need to bolster power structures shout us apart. At once Americans and citizens of the world, and not fighters in our assigned corners of the ring. Why does it always take disasters to make us drop the masks that keep us separated from one another and come together, if not in common consensus, then at least in common concern?

If a mighty fortress is our God, then isn't it counterproductive to build any other fortresses that separate us in our brief stay upon this earth? Isn't it in fact saying that either we do not trust God to be our refuge and our strength, or have we allied ourselves with an enemy of God's purpose?

If a mighty fortress is our God, then why do our suits of skin become armor in need of defense from prejudice based on racism, sexism, homophobia, or any of the other "isms" out there that seek to separate us out from the body of Christ? We spend too much time defending and attacking these fortresses of the bodies and identities we were born into instead of recognizing the spark of God in each other's eyes that gives us each a place at a peaceful table. If we truly believe the words of this psalm and the beauty of Luther's treatment of it, we can surrender ourselves as servants not of our self-interests, and ourselves but of the realm of God that includes us all.

If a mighty fortress is our God, then why do the three Abrahamic faiths fail to co-exist in the soil from which they grew in the Middle East, unless they have each tried to take their concept of God captive in the different names they give to the Absolute? By doing so, they call God into the

service of their own select in fortresses that deny the inherent worth of all human beings. Including and especially, the denial of those outside of their faith and their ways.

This is when I wonder if we can do the gospel at all. This is when I see the impossibility of the conditions Jesus sets in order for us to be true disciples. He tells us that any one who wants to follow Christ must renounce their own lives, their own fortresses, their own security and privilege, and take up the cross. Anyone who would save their own lives must lose them. He asks, "What benefit is it to win the whole world, but lose your very self?" Are any of us really ready to do that?

And then we live through a week like this one, led as we were by just such disciples who would lay everything down for the lives of others and for a brief moment we were not Republican, Democrat, gay, straight; neither male nor female, neither Greek nor Jew.

Where do you go when you need to feel a source of strength? Do you start at the well of spirituality for your strength when our concern for others precedes your own? Luther reminds us that God does not keep us out of trouble. Ours is a personal relationship that we build on trust, knowing that we are all in this thing together, especially among the power structures of our own choosing that work against us when we need to be together of one accord. This week, those structures momentarily ceased to exist for me, when I felt the need to be together as a people.

On this Reformation Sunday, honoring the first great reformation of the church, can we envision a new reformation of both the church and of the world? A church that once abused its centralized power, was through its own abuses forced to give up power through the actions of Martin Luther and others. No longer would indulgences be sold, and the Grace of God be held captive by people.

Our task is not to fight against the world even further, but to recognize that our strength, our refuge, and our fortress; can only be God. Only with the help of a Higher Power, can we drop our shields and assist each other. Only with the love that is God, can we re-order the world in some humane, all-inclusive fashion so that the hungry will be fed, the naked clothed, the children taught to read, and *we* teach ourselves not to hate, but to love one another. Bill Coffin once said, "We can finally have the courage to be honest without being hopeless. Hope means keeping the faith despite the evidence, and then watching the evidence change." All of this is our common task in God who has willed the Truth to come through us. From our hymn, "The Spirit and the gifts are ours, for Christ is with us siding. Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill; God's truth shall triumph still; God's reign endures forever."

The surprise at the end of Luther's hymn is one of "Why didn't I think of that?" Of course...if I can sing the first part, then I can sing the last part. If a mighty fortress is our God, then *why* make absolutes out of worldly goods? If a mighty fortress is our God, then *why* let justice be determined by who has the biggest fortress? Why not accept the call to discipleship that Jesus gives us and let go of our mortal fears and relentless quest for personal and corporate power, and enter into Christ's journey at the point of his walk to the cross. For the sake of the least of these, as well as for our own sake, the condition of following Christ demands a reformation of our churches, our systems of power, and most of all, our connection to the Spirit, from whom all things can be made new again.

On this Reformation Sunday, with Luther's words singing through our day, let us be made new again. Amen.

***Sermon Resources:***

Primary Sources: notes I took from hearing the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, somewhere around 1981-1983. Hymn: "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"

## Scripture for Sunday, October 28, 2007

**Psalm 46** 1 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. 2 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. 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. 8 Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought 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." 11 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

**Luke 9:23-26** 23 Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. 24 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. 25 What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? 26 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.