

A MIGHTY FORTRESS
Psalm 46, Romans 7:15-25
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With Reformation Sunday today and All Saints Day ahead of us this week, what better time to reflect on the theology of the Reformation.

Were Protestants called on to choose one hymn above all others, I suspect the majority vote would go to "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." I suspect Roman Catholics would vote the same, for they sing the hymn all the time, Martin Luther having become, to the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, more of an alumnus than an apostate. A gifted flute and lute player, as well as a brilliant theologian, Luther wrote the melody and the words to "A Mighty Fortress." This was in the year 1529. Centuries later, the German-Jewish poet Heinrich Heine called the hymn "the Marseillaise of the Reformation," which was a good description, because for the first 100 turbulent years of its life the hymn was an inspiration to German Lutherans and a tower of strength to Swedish soldiers and French Huguenot martyrs, many of whom died with it on their tongues. In 1631 it was sung by the entire army of Gustavus Adolphus before the battle of Leipzig. Its melody forms the central theme in Meyerbeer's "The Huguenots;" Mendelssohn used it in his "Reformation Symphony;" Wagner in his "Kaiser March;" and Bach in one of his sacred cantatas. The hymn is "not polished and artistically wrought," as the critic Louis Benson notes, "but rugged and strong like Luther himself, whose very words seem like deeds."

Everybody knows that Martin Luther started a reformation. What few people realize is that he also initiated a whole new hymnody, by writing hymns in the vernacular to be sung by all the people. And the outpouring of hymns in German since Luther's day has been nothing short of prolific. The fighting spirit of the Reformation, the pain and misery of the Thirty Years' War, the inward-looking mysticism of the pietists and the outward-looking enthusiasm of the Moravian - all have found expression in German hymns, whose number today must total almost 100,000. In contrast, the Calvinistic churches in England, Scotland, and New England rejected all hymns of "human composure" and for 200 years restricted their members to singing Biblical psalms made metrical. It wasn't until 1736, when John and Charles Wesley, onboard a storm--tossed ship bound for Crown colony of Savannah, Georgia, heard 26 Moravians stirringly out-vie the elements with their hymns, that Anglo-Saxon Christians finally began to wake up to what German Protestants had been enjoying all along.

On this Reformation Sunday, I propose that we look at the Reformation theology in "A Mighty Fortress." But first, it would be well to recall the hymn's historical setting. This year is the 526th anniversary of Luther's birth, which took place on November 10 in a town called Eisleben, in Saxony, which today is part of Germany but which then was a part of the Holy Roman Empire. Luther lived during a time when abuses were rife. Papal taxes were oppressive and unequally levied. The vast landholdings and treasure of the Church, including monastic houses, were exempted, while hardworking farmers and enterprising burghers paid through the nose. Many monks and parish priests were lazy and corrupt, and some bishops were so crooked that it was said they could have hidden behind corkscrews. Meanwhile, the Inquisition's stern repression of new ideas, which was sweeping north like a tide out of Spain, angered the intellectuals in Germany. Low standard of living with no prospect of relief enraged the peasants,

while the Church's sale of indulgences -- forgiveness of sins in return for cash -- shocked everyone. These conditions combined with the strivings of a popular religious awakening called for a leader who could bring the smoldering unrest to a focus of action. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, by this time a 34-year-old Augustinian monk and lecturer of theology at the University of Wittenberg, nailed his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle chapel, and announced that he was prepared to defend them against all challenges. Overnight he became famous, and shortly thereafter found himself in deep trouble. In 1521 he was ordered to appear before the Emperor Charles V and the Imperial Diet at Worms. His friends advised against it, but Luther asserted that even if there were as many devils in Worms as there were tiles on its rooftops, still he would go. When, as his friends had predicted, the legislative assembly demanded that he retract his errors, Luther declared: "It is neither safe nor honest to act against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me." He was excommunicated, his books were burned. Fortunately for him and for us, his friend Elector Frederick had him arrested -- taken into custody -and brought secretly to the Wartburg Castle near Eisenach. There Luther translated the New Testament, not from the Latin but for the first time from the original Greek -- a translation which to this day is the standard version used by the German people. A year later, Frederick turned his head and allowed Luther to escape, and the controversial thinker returned to lecturing and writing, mostly on the Bible; nor was this the end to his many battles, as the language of "A Mighty Fortress" reflects.

In writing his hymn, Luther used as his primary source of inspiration the 46th Psalm, the psalm that begins, "God is our refuge and strength." When Luther writes "A mighty fortress is our God," he is saying that a mighty fortress is -- not the pope, not the church, not the nation-states, not power, not money, not even my conscience, which is a good servant but a bad master; when Luther said it was neither safe nor honest to act against conscience he had just declared, "My conscience is captive in the word of God." No, a mighty fortress is my God, the sole bulwark, which faileth never. In other words, all things else are relative to this one Absolute. In declaring God's sovereignty over every institution and individual, Luther states what we all find impossibly hard to do: keep things in their proper order, first things first.

"Our helper he amid the flood" reflects again the sentiments of the 46th psalm: "a very present help in trouble." Like the psalmist, Luther insists that God does not protect us from, but supports us amid, "the flood of mortal ills" which sooner or later engulfs us all.

In other words, if our security is with the Absolute, we can, and we must, like Luther, take on all temporal insecurities. Before going to Worms, Luther was asked, "Where will you be, Brother Martin, when Church, State, Princes and people turn against you? Where will be then?" To which Luther answered, "Why, then as now, in the hands of Almighty God."

Let me, on this Reformation Sunday, ask you a similar question: "Where will we be, dear brother, dear sister, when this world approaches even nearer the very gates of death and destruction. Where will we be then?"

How many of us, undaunted by so certain a prospect, can answer, "Why, then as now, in the hands of Almighty God?" How hard it is to have the courage to be honest without becoming hopeless!

What makes "A Mighty Fortress" so eternally relevant is that every line is right on the nerve.

For still out ancient foe Doth seek to work us woe His craft and power are great And armed with cruel hate On earth is not his equal.

How right were folk in the pre-scientific age to believe in the devil; and what a slaughterhouse of the imagination we make out of the scientific age! Evil should be personified if we experience it as personal power. Evil should be personified if, although it arises within us, it is experienced as something bigger and stronger than we are -- "on earth is not his equal." It's perfectly true that, "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing." Those who believe in the perfection of human beings simply show how little they have tried to live out their convictions. St. Paul was right: "The good that I would I do not; and that which I would not, that I do." But, as Paul also wrote, "thanks be to God, who givest us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Christ, whom Luther calls "the right man at our side, the man of God's own choosing."

The hymn continues. "Lord Sabaoth his name." Lord Sabaoth was a title ancient Israelites liked to give to Yahweh, the commander of the hosts of heaven. It is not surprising that Luther should turn to all these military symbols and metaphors -- God, as fortress, the devil "armed" with cruel hate, Jesus as Lord Sabaoth, "and he must win the battle" -- for as I earlier suggested, Luther was fighting on many fronts against the church, against some princes, against people and their populist leaders, too, fearing that they would make overly political his religious revolution.

"And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us." And what imagery again: the Devil has not spawned little devils to carry out their little devilish schemes... like little invasions of little islands, quick fixes that inevitably become prolonged agonies, designed to distract us once again from the main business of this world. And what is the main business of this world? Why, clearly, not to irritate things still further but to save them -- by bringing arms under control, by keeping our streets safe, by reordering the world's priorities so that the hungry can be fed and the naked clothed, so that the children can be taught to read, and so that we can all learn not to hate but to love one another. And all this is our common task with God, who "hath willed his truth to triumph through us."

"The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him." Once again the devil, and once again we are back to the old problem of finding the courage to be honest without becoming hopeless. Says Luther, in effect: "If you can't be hopeful at least you can be persistent." And then he seems to redefine hope as a process of keeping the faith despite the evidence, and then slowly but surely watching the evidence change. "For lo, his doom is sure, one little word shall fell him."

But the cause will be won only by "that word above all earthly powers." "The spirit and the gifts are ours through him who with us sideth." Luther always ends where he begins, with the wounds and the resurrection of Jesus Christ; and his confidence in human beings stems from his faith that "God can carve the rotten wood, and ride the lame horse."

And then comes the absolutely inevitable ending. Isn't it true that the great attraction of murder mysteries, of "whodunnits," is that the surprise at the end is only the discovery of inevitability? Well, that's true of God's surprises: they too represent the discovery of inevitability. If a mighty fortress is my God, then why do I make an Absolute out of national security? If a mighty fortress is my God, then why make absolutes out of worldly goods, out of family, even out of life itself? Yes, I see it now: if I can sing the first part of the hymn with conviction then I can sing the last part with no less. If "A mighty fortress is our God, the sole bulwark that never faileth," then of course, "Let goods and kindred go This mortal life also The body they may kill God's truth abideth still His Kingdom is forever."

Yes, I see it now: what are worldly things compared to the treasures of a Kingdom that shall never end? And I see just as clearly that the task of a reformed and still reforming church is not so much to discover new truth as to rediscover that which has been lost and found, and lost again and again -- what Luther in the 62nd of the 95 Theses called "The most Holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God." And that, dear friends, is not for sale. It's a free, a miraculous gift to each and every one of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.