

Lectionary 23 A 2020 (Modified)

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

September 6, 2020

Psalm 46

“Fearless”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

I remember the first time I was sitting in a pew in a Roman Catholic church looking through the hymnal that was there. The very common, traditional hymnal. The red book, even. Worship, third edition, 1986. And thumbing through that Catholic hymnal, I spotted “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” Martin Luther’s most famous hymn. It’s a hymn that has absolutely nothing to do with the Reformation. Or with any of the reasons we think that the Reformation took place. “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” is about an epic battle between Evil and Good, between Satan and Christ. It works fine as a Catholic hymn, or as a Baptist hymn. I daresay it would work fine as a Mormon hymn.

Luther’s famous hymn is based on our psalm today. Psalm 46. Which is from the Old Testament. It’s Jewish. It doesn’t mention Christ or Satan. You wonder how the Jews must feel about what we’ve done with their psalm. I’ve been afraid to ask.

The collection of psalms– the psalter, the “book” of psalms– has quite a bit about war, and enemies. It’s not shy about asking God to defeat my enemies. My military enemies. It’s not timid about praising God when the enemies have been violently defeated. Christianity typically reinterprets the enemies as spiritual enemies. Satan. Sin. Evil. Death. And so the psalms get re-written by Christians in order to turn military battles into spiritual ones. To turn the tribal enemies of the ancient holy land into spiritual opponents. And that’s exactly what Martin Luther does with Psalm 46 When he turns it into “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

But what I think is really striking about Psalm 46 is that it isn’t really about good guys versus bad guys. It’s really about confidence versus fear. Confidence in God, specifically. And not just any God. “The God of Jacob is our stronghold.” Jacob, the cheater and liar and romantic lover. Who was renamed “Israel”– the one who wrestles with God. Isn’t it fascinating that the word “Islam” is Arabic for *submission*? And you can have an entire religion, an entire way of life built around submission to God. I wonder how that is similar to, and different from, “Israel,” an entire religion and a way of life that wrestles with God. Israel. Jacob. “The God of Jacob is our stronghold.”

It is in *this* God– the God that Jacob wrestled with– that we place our confidence. I think it’s striking in this psalm, that the mountains may shake and the waters may rage and foam. This

psalm isn't so much about God defeating our enemies— with all due respect to Martin Luther— this psalm is also about natural disasters And chaos. And in the poetry of this psalm, God is a location— a refuge, a mighty fortress, a city, a river. God is a place that we can turn to away from the turmoil and the enemies, all the destruction, all the evil. Mountains may shake. Waters may rage and foam. God is a safe space, a protected retreat. *A mighty fortress is our God. A bulwark never failing.*

And yet that safe space is at our fingertips, like an app on a smart phone. “A very present help,” the psalmist says. Not, “a present help.” But a VERY present help. It's in the Hebrew. VERY present. Not far away. Not just present. VERY present.

You know: the most repeated statement in the Bible is “*Do not be afraid.*” Have no fear. You'd think, maybe, that the most common expression in the Bible would be about love. Or about mercy. Love people. Have mercy on people. Those are big messages, those are big exhortations. But that's not the case. Everybody in the Bible is saying, “Do not be afraid.” Moses and the prophets. Jesus and the apostles. The angels and the messengers. *Have no fear.*

I think that's shocking to a lot of Christians. You come to church on Christmas Eve, and you hear, “*Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.*” [Luke 2:10] Or you come to church on Easter morning, and you hear, *The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.’* [Matthew 28:5-6] At Christmas: *Do not be afraid.* At Easter: *Do not be afraid.* One would think that even casual observers of our religion would be struck by how this message repeats itself, even on the holiest observances of the Christian religion. Have no fear.

Psalm 46 is about being fearless. The reason for fearlessness is stated in the first three lines: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear. Did you catch the “therefore”? God is our refuge. A mighty fortress, a bulwark never failing. THEREFORE we will not fear. His very present help in trouble. THEREFORE we will not fear. The psalm gives four “thoughts.” *THOUGH* the earth be moved. *THOUGH* the mountains under the ocean shake. *THOUGH* the waters rage. *THOUGH* the mountains tremble. We will not fear *THOUGH* w, x, y, and z. Do you have a “though”? An “although”? Who's got a “though”? Raise your hand if you've got a “though.” The psalmist had four. Who has: A persistent fear or problem? An unbearable change? An earthquake? Do you have a though? The Lord of hosts is with us, The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Therefore we will not fear.

We're not going to sing “A Mighty Fortress.” A couple of years ago we did a project together at Dove of Peace. And we discovered that the most popular song in our congregation is “How Great Thou Art.” And the second most popular song is the one we're about to sing: “When Peace Like a River.” Which is also known by its refrain: “*It is well with my soul.*” In this hymn, the wellness of my soul does not derive from peace like a river. The first eight words of the hymn are about peace. The next six words are “When sorrows like sea billows blow.” So

it's when good things happen, when bad things happen. *Whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say, It is well with my soul.* My soul does not depend on peace like a river. Because that peace like a river is going to be taken away from me and replaced with sorrows like sea billows. The peace like a river is not the foundation of my security. According to this hymn.

The hymn was written by a father after he lost all four of his children, all four of them girls, in a tragic boat accident in the Atlantic Ocean. He wasn't on the boat. His wife was, and she survived, but all four children perished in the ocean. The tune– the music– is entitled *Ville du Havre*, the name of the ship that sank. This hymn was written in the face of great tragedy. Some would say the most unspeakable and horrifying thing that can ever happen to a human being. The loss of a child. Of all the children. So this hymn is not about being blessed with good things. It's about God's constancy. God's being a very present help in time of trouble. And *that* is why it is well with my soul. Not all of this other stuff.

Psalm 46 comes to a conclusion with “Be still and know that I am God.” Martin Luther, who also knew the loss of more than one child, concludes his rewriting of Psalm 46 with “Though.” *Though they may take our life, goods, honor, child, or wife.* Though they may take our house, goods, name, child, or spouse. They cannot win the day. The kingdom's ours forever.

The various voices of our Bible and our religion challenge us to be fearless. Not reckless. We live in a society where reckless behavior is often admired. And can even get you elected to high office. The Bible has a lot to say about recklessness. All of it negative. But a fearless person can sing: *It is well with my soul. Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say: It is well with my soul.* Though they may take our house, goods, name, child, or spouse. I will be still and know that you are God. It is well with my soul. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Amen.