

Text: Psalm 46, selected verses. Reformation Sunday. **November 1, 2015.**

Grace and peace are yours through our Mighty Fortress, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Picture a fortress. A fortress. What do you see? A castle? Made of solid bricks. Perched high atop a rocky cliff. Impenetrable. Easily defensible. Almost inaccessible. Yet for miles around, highly visible. Can you see it? What's the purpose of that fortress? Refuge? Safety? Defense? Is the fortress, as you picture it, only for keeping the bad guys out? Or is it also for letting more people in, to be safe, to find refuge? Is the refuge of the fortress to be hoarded or shared?

When I hear the word fortress, my mind goes to a picture at our church body's Seminary, graduate school for pastors. Not cemetery, Seminary. At the Seminary, there is a painting on plaster of the Wartburg castle in Germany. Martin Luther spent several months in this castle, in hiding, as an outlaw, unable to leave because there was a high price on his head. But in that castle he found refuge. And more importantly, God was his fortress. Do you know what Martin Luther did during that time? He translated the Bible from the original languages of Greek and Hebrew into German, so the average person could read it. God used him to put God's Word into the hands of millions of people. The refuge we find in God's Word was not hoarded in that Wartburg castle. It was shared. It was spread. It blazed through the country like a wildfire. God's Word set hearts on fire, hearts that kept sharing and kept spreading God's Word. So that today, almost 500 years later, and half a world away, we are still hearing God's Word. We are still enjoying that refuge. We are still gathering in this fortress.

But my Christian friends, this refuge is not for hoarding. It's for sharing. This fortress is not designed to keep people out. This fortress was made to let people in. Yes, I pray you come here to find refuge and strength. But this is not a hiding place. This is an empowering place. The fortress known as the Church does not begin at 6705 Wesner Road. The Church does not stop at the dog park. This is a hospital for sinners from which God's Word goes out. This is a fortress where sinners like you and me find refuge. It's true, a mighty fortress is our God. Our God is a Mighty fortress.

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. God is our helper who is always found. God doesn't reside in some distant fortress of heaven. God made himself easily found, right in his Word. That help in trouble is always there. If you don't know exactly where to look in the Bible for a certain trouble, ask Pastor. It will be the best text or email I get all day. Ask Vicar. Ask another believer. God is a helper who is always found.

Even in the worst trouble. Can you imagine the earth giving way? We don't live in earthquake country, so maybe it's hard to imagine. What if this building started to shake? What would you do? Sit quietly? Wait for it to pass? Start screaming? Hide under the chair? What if that hill, right outside this window, not a huge one, what if it just fell down, collapsed into a swamp? What if you were in a row boat, on a lake, and a storm came up with whitecaps crashing over the edge, think worse than anything ever seen on *Deadliest Catch*? What would you do?

Would you stand up and say, "I'm not afraid?" I doubt it. I think most people would be freaking out! The earth gives way? The mountains fall into the heart of the sea? The waters roar and foam? The mountains quake as the waters surge? Would you really say, "I'm not afraid. God is my refuge and strength"?

I think we'd be freakin' out! I think plenty of people would be going crazy! And it doesn't even take an earthquake. You find out you have a rare, genetic disease. It will change your life. Your earth is rocked. Are you freakin' out, forgetting that God is our refuge and strength? One family member runs outside the fortress of the Church. Freak out? Stay hunkered down in the fortress? "At least I'm safe!" Run out, try to bring them back in? Is this just a fortress that keeps others out? Or is this a beacon, to bring more people in? I know this is maybe makin' you feel bad. That's because we are fallen. We freak out. We fail to find the fortress when the waters are foaming. We keep the gates to the fortress shut.

But there is one who opened the gates. Jesus. He even said, "I am the gate!" He opened the gate to heaven with his empty tomb. That's the one and only way into the fortress, through Jesus. With Jesus, the waters are not roaring and foaming. The waters are a gentle river giving life, eternal life. Jesus said, "I am the living water. Whoever drinks from me will never be thirsty." Notice the change in the tone of this Psalm. Waters go from roaring and foaming to a river, with quiet streams, making glad. Where did this river come from? Well, let's look to the beginning of the Bible. At the very beginning of the world, when the earth was still perfect, in the Garden of Eden, there was a river, actually four of them, that watered that garden and gave it life. At the end of the Bible, in almost the very last chapter, God paints a picture of heaven, it's a place with a river flowing, bringing water, giving life, making glad for all eternity. Here, in Psalm 46, very nearly the exact middle of the Bible (remember how to find Psalms? Open your Bible to the middle.) we see a river, whose streams make glad the city of God. Beginning, end and middle, God uses a river to picture heaven, the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.

God is within her, within this city. God, who is our mighty fortress, whom we might see as inaccessible, unapproachable, is right here, right now. The displays of God's presence might not seem like anything special. A few drops of water on a baby's head. But God is there, washing away that baby's sins. God is there, declaring, "This is my child, for life and for eternal life." Waters don't have to roar and foam for God to show his power. Water just has to drip and be tied with his Word, for God to show his love. God is within us, not just in the feelings of your heart, which may be fickle and may lead to fear. God himself, is right here, placing his blood on the soul of one fearful sinner, saying, "Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace." Jesus is right here, placing his body into the hands of one sinner, ready to wander outside the fortress saying, "Don't be afraid. I am your refuge and strength." God is within us.

He calls all believers his body, the Holy Christian Church, an invisible, yet very real, fortress, a place of safe refuge that will last for all eternity. Long after a church by the dog park is gone and forgotten, the Church will stand. The fortress will endure. The refuge and strength will still be present. Here on earth and forever in heaven.

God is within us. We just need to be still and know that he is God. Be still. The word means relax. Aaron Rodgers didn't invent that word last year to calm down fans. God put that word relax in his Word to calm us down. Frankie Goes to Hollywood wasn't the first one to say, "Relax." God told us to relax. He is God. We can relax. He is with us. We can be still. He is God. No matter what you face, your own sickness, be still. Dad dying. Relax. He is God. Fighting with your spouse. You don't have to be the man who doesn't listen because he's too busy trying to fix it. You need to be still and know that he is God. You just need to remember, "Be still and know that I am God."

The mighty Lord is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. There's a reason that was the refrain in our Psalm this morning. It's a refrain in Psalm 46 in the Bible. The mighty Lord is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress.

The mighty Lord is with us. That word for mighty is often translated almighty. It talks about God as the one who controls the armies, the one who directs the very hosts of heaven, the Savior who could call down 72,000 angels at once, instead calls those angels to protect his children, be with the ones he loved, guide the Church for whom he died. This mighty Lord is with us.

This God of Jacob is our fortress. Notice the word in the refrain, fortress, is different from the word in the early verse of the Psalm, refuge. They are both very comforting words. God is our refuge, a safe place which God makes easily found and to which we can always run. But fortress adds a little something different. A fortress is a place that is high, exalted, extra secure. Ancient cities had this place of last resort. If the city was under attack, and the people were losing, they knew the place of retreat. Maybe it was a tower. Maybe it was a high place in a castle. But they knew when all else failed, they could still go there and be safe. Now, the point is not that God is high and exalted and inaccessible and our last resort when all else that we tried failed. The point is that God is always with us. And God is always our safety. If God is for us, who can be against us? God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all! God is not our last resort. God is our first resort. God is not our plan B when all else fails. God is our plan A, our safety, our fortress.

This fortress is not for locking us in and keeping others out. This fortress is a beacon, to let others in. A fortress, a castle, was often placed on a high mountain, visible for miles around. Don't think of that height as a formidable obstacle, think of that height as an invitation to attract people to it.

Think of what God led us to do about two years ago. God led us to send out 30 brave missionaries to Mt. Horeb to proclaim the Good News and start Good News Lutheran Church. We didn't close the doors to this fortress. God led us to build another fortress. From that fortress in Mt. Horeb we went out and invited more people to find refuge and strength in our ever-present help. And that fortress now has doubled from 30 safe inhabitants, to over 60! It was risky. We could have seen it as losing 30 people. But we didn't lose 30. God's kingdom gained 30. And God has more than replaced those 30 here. Our membership after commissioning those 30 missionaries? 253. Our membership today? 296. Maybe you prayed for those 30. Maybe you laid tile in the new fortress. Maybe you increased your offerings so more people in Mt. Horeb and Verona would hear the Good News and be brought into the fortress. Maybe you've passed out fliers or spoke words of encouragement to those 30 brave fortress builders. Maybe you are already thinking about the next fortress, praying for God to lead us to open doors in a new place like Fitchburg. Maybe you will be one of the next brave 30 or 50 or 20 to build another fortress, because you are looking forward to the ultimate fortress, the fortress of heaven and you can't wait for more people to get to that fortress, because you know, a mighty fortress is our God. Amen.