

The God of Jacob is our Fortress

In the name of the Son who sets us free indeed, dear friends in Christ: “My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord”. So wrote Julia Ward Howe in the opening line of what became known as *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. Set to the catchy tune of *John Brown’s Body*, the *Battle Hymn* became the foremost anthem that inspired the troops of the Northern Army during the Civil War. And its memorable refrain of “Glory, glory hallelujah; His truth is marching on” helped reinforce in them the justice of their cause.

In a similar way, some 340 years earlier, Luther’s hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is our God* became the battle hymn of the Reformation. This was an entirely different kind of war. It really was a battle for God’s truth. And while it’s true that at times it involved armed conflict, it was in its very essence a war of ideas. It was a war to free people, not from the physical bonds of slavery, but from the spiritual slavery of belief in lies and superstitions and trust for salvation in such things as supposedly holy relics, the bones of saints, indulgences, fasts and pilgrimages, monastic vows, and all kinds of other human works rather than in Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. The reformers did not need to be reassured of the justice of their cause. What could be more just than restoring to the Church and to the people of God the pure Gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? What is more just than the simple truth of Christ that sets us free? No, what the reformers needed was reassurance of the Lord’s divine protection as they pursued their noble task. They were, after all, going up against what were at that time the most powerful human forces in the world. More significantly, they were going up against what are at all times and in every age the most powerful evil spiritual forces in the world: Satan and all the powers of darkness. With such forces arrayed against them, the reformers rightly had cause for concern.

This is why for his inspiration Luther based his “battle hymn of the Reformation” on Psalm 46, which we used as this morning’s introit. It is a psalm of confidence, of absolute trust in the Lord especially in times of menacing threat and danger. So, with this in mind what I propose doing on this Reformation Day is looking at the psalm in some detail, briefly analyzing how Luther utilized it for the hymn, and then consider how it applies to us in our present time of threat and danger.

The surface setting of the psalm is Jerusalem, the Holy City of God, the place where the Lord’s glory dwells. The city was when the psalmist wrote situated on steep hills and surrounded by high, thick walls interspaced at regular intervals by sturdy fighting towers. From a military point of view it was easy to defend and difficult for any enemy to capture. The city was indeed “a mighty fortress”. But what the psalmist essentially says is forget about the fortifications. They are puny and insignificant compared to our true refuge and strength. The Lord himself is our mighty defense. The God of Jacob is our fortress.

Therefore, the psalmist says, we will not fear though the earth gives way and the mountains are swallowed up by the sea. He likely knew something about that. Israel is a seismically active place, not unlike southern California. A good earthquake could reduce a city’s wall to piles of rubble in an instant; but no earthquake or any other natural disaster can dislodge the Lord’s mighty arm defending his people. Though creation itself come undone, the Lord of creation is still in control of all things and guarding his people from harm.

The psalmist continues, “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God”. What’s interesting about this is that for most of Israel’s history, Jerusalem had no internal free

flowing water source. That, of course, made it vulnerable. Under a prolonged siege the best defensive fortifications in the world don't do you much good if you run out of water. And like I said, they fixed this problem later when Hezekiah was king; but the psalmist likely wrote long before that. It tells us that he had something else in mind: a supernatural river - one that wells up from the ground and then divides into a number of streams, just like the river that flowed originally from the Garden of Eden.

And that's our clue: the psalmist was a prophet who wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This river that makes the city of God glad is the same one that Christ spoke of when he said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink", and when he told the woman at the well that he had living water that if anyone drank they'd never get thirsty again. It's the river of the water of life, the river of God's grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness that flows from Christ himself. This is the source of life and gladness for God's people at all times.

And then the psalmist describes the Lord's abiding presence with his people: "God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved." This is a reference to the Temple, God's house on earth. This is key: pagans built temples and put idols in them to represent gods that were essentially absent. They lived someplace else - on Mount Olympus or under the sea or in the underworld, wherever. They weren't here. But the Lord's temple was unique. *He was actually in the building.* That was the whole point of it. Yes, the ancient Israelites understood that God is everywhere, but they also understood that he had chosen one particular place on earth to make his gracious presence known; a place where he would hear the prayers of his people and where sacrifices could be offered for the forgiveness of sins. I am not a God far away, he told them. I am a God with you.

This is the ground of our confidence. God is with us in trouble. And he speaks to comfort us, "Be still and know that I am God." He's saying, whatever it is you're worried about, I have it under control. You've got to picture yourself a soldier standing on the wall of the city. Here comes this mighty army with siege towers and catapults and other terrifying engines of war. We're outnumbered by thousands to one. And the Lord says, "Have no fear. You're perfectly safe. They can't touch you. I won't let them."

He isn't all defense either. He takes the battle to the enemy. He puts an end to the war. While you watch from the safety of the wall he's out breaking the weapons of the enemy and burning up their chariots. He lifts his voice and the earth they're standing on melts under their feet. That's gotta hurt. But all you do is watch: behold the works of the Lord. And the psalmist closes with these words of confidence: the LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

That's the psalm, and now it's easy to see how its major themes are all reflected in the hymn. "A mighty fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon; He helps us free from ev'ry need that hath us now o'er-taken". Yes, Satan is out there making all kinds of scary faces and trying to deceive us, and on our own we wouldn't stand a chance against him. But Jesus is on our side. He's already won the battle for our salvation. And so now even if the world were full of devils, they can do us no harm. One word of Christ sets us free. Therefore we can lose it all: Goods, fame, child, spouse, even our own lives. In Christ the kingdom is ours and can't be taken away.

The world the reformers lived in was in many ways very different than ours. Confessing the truth of the Gospel could get you imprisoned, tortured, and killed - often by being tied to stake and burned to death. Many people were. Luther himself spent most of his life with a price on his head. We face no such threats in our day. And they had other worries back then too.

Wars were fought to suppress the true faith. There were famines and plagues. We face Covid-19 that kills less than one percent of its victims. They faced the Black Death and the Bubonic plague both of which kill something around a third of those who contract them. My point being that the world was a much scarier place back then.

But the reformers and those who benefited from their work were not afraid. Inspired in part by the Battle Hymn of the Reformation, and more importantly by the Word of God it's based upon and the restored Gospel of Jesus Christ that underlies it, they lived and they died in complete confidence in the God of Jacob who was their fortress and still is ours today. By God's grace, may we too live without fear in perfect confidence in the Lord of hosts who is with us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!