

A Mighty Fortress!
Psalm 46

Martin was living through a difficult period of time – both personally and socially – both privately and corporately – both in his own life as well as in the life of the broader community. Several years prior, due to Martin's various activities, the governing authorities had declared him an outlaw and a criminal and had sought his arrest and punishment. Fortunately, he found refuge with friends and avoided apprehension – though a close friend of his was arrested and executed during this time. Then, just a few years after their initial edict condemning him, those same governing authorities reconvened, reconsidered, and ultimately rescinded their previous verdict, only to reverse themselves again just a few months prior to this period in Martin's life. In addition to all of this, down to the south of Martin's home a massive foreign power had invaded and was threatening to overrun much of the region. And to make matters worse, a mysterious sickness had infected one of the principle cities of Martin's day. This sickness came on suddenly and often caused death within a matter of hours. Indeed, Martin was living through difficult days.

Being a man of faith, Martin turned to scripture, as he always did, for solace and for comfort during these trying times, and his eyes fell upon the words of Psalm 46:

To the leader. Of the Korahites. According to Alamoth. A Song.

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. *Selah*

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.

'Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.'
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

Being a man of musical persuasion, Martin was inspired by this ancient song to write a new song of his own. Have you heard it?

A mighty fortress is our God,
a bulwark never failing;
our helper he, amid the flood
of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe
does seek to work us woe;
his craft and power are great,
and armed with cruel hate,
on earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide,
our striving would be losing,
were not the right Man on our side,
the Man of God's own choosing.
You ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he;
Lord Sabaoth his name,
from age to age the same;
and he must win the battle.

And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God has willed
his truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure,
for lo! his doom is sure;
one little word shall fell him.

And that, my friends, is how Martin Luther, inspired by the words of Psalm 46, came to write one of the most revered songs in all of the Christian faith.¹ But Luther is not alone

¹ The circumstances surrounding the writing of *A Mighty Fortress* are a bit sketchy. The song was first published in 1529. The events herein described occurred during the period preceding and including the

in being inspired by the 46th Psalm. Countless Christians throughout time have been inspired and comforted by its words - especially in times of trial or great difficulty. In fact, according to one commentator I read, "Those who surveyed the churches in North America the Sunday after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 noted that Psalm 46 was one of the most commonly preached texts that week."² I am not surprised!

Without a doubt, Psalm 46 provides a powerful antidote to the fears that sometime seize us, and especially the fear that seems to be gripping our world today as we face the current COVID-19 worldwide pandemic. It provides that antidote, not by turning a blind eye to the dangerous realities of the world in which we live, but by facing them head on and with faith in God. Although we don't know the precise circumstances surrounding the origins of this psalm, the Psalmist speaks of a changing earth, mountains shaking in the heart of the sea, waters roaring and foaming, mountains trembling in tumult, nations in uproar, and kingdoms tottering. All of that sounds very much like this present period in which we find ourselves. The earth is changing. The nations are in an uproar. The kingdoms are tottering as stock markets, worldwide, totter under the hammer blows of the coronavirus that is spreading fear throughout the world.

But despite all of this fear and uncertainty, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear..." (Psalm 46:1-2) No, we will not fear because God is a "very present" help in time of trouble or, as the footnote to the New Revised Standard Version has it, God is a "well proved" help in troubling times.

Yes, God is a "very present" help in times of trouble! In this time of social distancing, when people have been asked to stay at home, or stay at least 3 feet from others when out in public so as to limit their exposure to and any cross-contamination with the coronavirus, it's good to know that God is still with us – he is with us and we are not alone! You see, the bible is replete with the comforting promise of God's eternal presence. Here are just a few of those promises:

- In Deuteronomy 31:6, Moses spoke to the people and said, "Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread...because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you."

year of publication. Luther was declared an outlaw by the Diet of Worms in 1521. The sanctions against him were suspended in 1527 by the Diet of Speyer and reinstituted in April of 1529. His friend, Leonard Kaiser, was martyred for his faith in August of 1527 and some commentators think Luther wrote this hymn in response to his friend's death. In the summer and fall of 1529, the English sweating sickness reached Lubeck in Northern Germany and spread from there. Finally, also during the summer and fall of 1529, Suleiman the Magnificent reinvaded Hungary and laid siege to the city of Vienna.

² *Psalm 46 Proper 29C, November 18, 2019* commentary by Scott Hoezee, published on the Center for Excellence in Preaching at: https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-29c-2/?type=the_lectionary_psalms. Current as of March 19, 2020.

- In Joshua 1:9, God spoke to Joshua and said, "I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."
- In Isaiah 41:10, God spoke to Israel and said, "Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."
- In Zephaniah 3:17, the prophet Zephaniah spoke to the citizens of Judah and said, "The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing."
- In Matthew 28:20, Jesus spoke to his disciples and said simply, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."
- In Romans 8:38-39, the apostle Paul spoke to the Christians at Rome and said, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."
- And in Hebrews 13:5, God says finally: "I will never leave you or forsake you."

Yes, God is a "very present" help in times of trouble! But he is also a "well proved" help in troublesome times as that footnote in the bible has it! Do you remember that old hymn:

'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus,
and to take him at his word;
just to rest upon his promise,
and to know, "Thus saith the Lord."

Jesus, Jesus, how I trust him!
How I've proved him o'er and o'er!
Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus!
O for grace to trust him more!

Have you ever "proved" the Lord? Has he ever proven himself to you? I suspect, if your life is like mine, then you can recall countless times when the Lord has proven himself faithful and helpful in times of great need! And so, during these anxious and uncertain times, it might do us all a bit of good to take a stroll down memory lane to recall all those prior times when the Lord proved himself to us so that our faith might be strengthened to believe that he will prove himself to us again! My friends, God can be trusted to be a present and a proved help in this time of personal, national, and international anxiety! You can count on him for that!

In closing, let me simply echo God's own word from Psalm 46:10. God says, "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth."

During this time of national crisis, we have all been urged to slow down and be still awhile. Children are home from school. Many parents are home from work. All of us have been urged to stay home as much as possible and stay away from others for fear of spreading this disease. During this time of increased stillness, it might do us all some good to remember that God is exalted among the nations – he is exalted in the earth. Let this time of increased physical stillness be matched by a time of increased spiritual stillness as we let go of our anxieties – as we cast our cares upon the One who cares for us – that we might remember and rejoice in the fact that “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” (Psalm 46:11) And instead of hovering constantly in front of the latest anxiety producing news, maybe we should spend more time in quiet prayer, bible reading, meditation, and communion with our God so that we might discover afresh and anew: “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.” Yes, God will help us when the morning dawn so long as we look to him for that aid! So come, Lord Jesus, with the dawn, and bring us your saving help anew. And all of God’s people said: Amen!

Questions and Actions for Reflection:

What verse of Psalm 46 speaks most to your situation and why?

What phrase of Luther’s hymn *A Mighty Fortress* most appeals to you and why?

Which of the bulleted verses about God’s presence, as listed in the sermon above, might you want to memorize as you spend this quiet season with the Lord?

Make a list of those occasions when God proved himself helpful during trying times. Which of those times is most like this time?

How might you match this time of physical stillness with spiritual stillness? Is there some spiritual discipline or practice that you would like to renew or learn? What is it and how might you begin?