

GOD IS WITH US, AS REFUGE AND STRENGTH

Hear again the Word of God for this Reformation Festival:

Elohim (is) to us Refuge and Strength, Help in pressures well proved.¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Throughout history, God has repeatedly worked through His called messengers to proclaim His protection, strength, and help for those who hear and believe His Word. This He has done in times of great physical, emotional, and spiritual pressures as well as in times of worldly and religious peace. God, Whose revealed Nature is to give grace and mercy to sinners, is, through His chosen means, an eternal refuge. He is ever such for those who are called by His Name, who continue to believe in Him, and who regularly receive His gifts.

Today we here shall all receive God's All-Hallow Eve's gifts. For those who receive them in the Faith, they bring forgiveness and strengthening to eternal life. For those who do not, they bring judgment. So that we may continue to receive God's gifts rightly, this evening the Church in this place remembers God's grace in returning His Church to His Word's emphasis concerning Jesus' all-sufficient work on the cross to bring forgiveness of sin to all sinners.

We remember that, in 1517 AD, Martin Luther, in Wittenburg, nailed 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church. Within eleven years of that event, the Church orders in the city of Brunswick had been amended to include a Feast of the Reformation.

¹ Psalm 46: 2, MT

Eleven years after that, in the Saxon order of service, the Collect we prayed tonight entered into the Church's public services. Finally, about a decade after that, the Elector of Saxony set October 31 as the day in which to mark an annual Festival of the Reformation.

By that time, 1548 or so, tonight's Gradual Hymn based on Psalm 46 had been sung in the Church for twenty years. The same priest who nailed the Theses on the Castle Church had composed those words. He joined them to notes in the rhythm to which we sang them tonight. He did so for the Church and her struggles in the age in which he lived.

Little would he have known how much his composition would be relevant to the Church in her struggles in this era, as she approaches the 500th anniversary of the Reformation! These words, illumined from the God-breathed words of Psalm 46, are still true and needed by God's people. That is so in whatever language they may be translated. For, in them, God is confessed:

Ein Feste Burg ist unser Gott, ein gute Wehr und Waffen; er hilft uns frei aus aller Noth, die uns jetzt hat betroffen².

Since the Apostle teaches that no one is to speak in tongues without a translation, here it is: *A strong Castle is our God, a good mail-coat and weapon; He helps us free from every need that now has dismayed us.* (From that, the hymnal puts the English in better form to match the syncopated music).

² Kirchen-Gesangbuch fuer Evangelisch=Lutherische Gemeinden ungeaenderter Augsburgischer Confession, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1893, 104

What we might learn from those paraphrases of tonight's hymn is that, for His people, God is both Protector and Keeper of His Church. In addition, He also covers and defends each person in that Church. While others in our society today are celebrating the pagan festival of Samhain with secular rites which most do not know are derived from Gaelic/Celtic traditions, God has gathered us here. That is so that we may be reminded by the Word of God which has been declared among us, that no ghosts, goblins, zombies, demons, or devils truly need to be any trouble for us. God's people do not need costumes and jack-o-lanterns to frighten off the terrors of the night (though we, in Christian freedom, may celebrate the Halloween festivities without pagan faith, in fine secular forms).

You see, we who have already died to sin; we who have been rescued by God from the power of the devil and his minions; we - you - are truly free from all the pressures - tribulations - of this fallen creation. That is true whether such be physical, emotional, and/or spiritual. Our freedom from all that this fallen creation and fallen creatures can bring to bear upon us is bound up in our being held fast to Christ. God's truths - eternal and given in time on earth - stand. This is so whether we have enough power to stand on our own for a minute, or, joined together in Christ, for a lifetime. That is why the nearly five-century-old hymn paraphrase of Psalm 46 is as true, or even more so, for us than for the reformers of the 16th century. The opening words of this day's festival Psalm declare why God's people can be so bold as to cling to Christ Jesus in all humility in the face of all created terrors:

*Elohim (is) to us Refuge and Strength, Help in pressures well proved.*³

Those words are to be sung by a people who have heard, believed, and beheld God's protection and grace. (According to the text note, verse 1 in the Hebrew, as attested to by solid commentators, was sung by male tenors in the Levitical choir of the Old Temple). Theirs is a Psalm of thanks, of joy; for all that God has done, does, and will do for His people. The first verse in your bulletins is one which declares that which God's people confess about Him. It does not begin with anything they, we, you, do. Rather, it declares that which God *is* for His people. Its theme is echoed twice more in the Psalm with words which may be translated like this:

*YHWH Sabaoth (is) with us; dwelling place for us (is) Elohe of Jacob. (Selah)*⁴

Between that last verse and its first iteration, lie three verses that declare God's power and the called for response to that reality. Between the first iteration of those words and the opening verse of the Psalm lie five verses. They proclaim the divine reasons why God's people do not fear unto the loss of their salvation and eternal souls when the fallenness of this creation presses in upon them, us.

Does this then mean that we, you, will never fear? The Psalm does declare:

*Elohim (is) to us Refuge and Strength, Help in pressures well proved.*⁵ And, two times: *YHWH Sabaoth (is) with us; dwelling place for us (is) Elohe of Jacob. (Selah)*⁶

³ *Psalm 46: 2, MT*

⁴ *Psalm 46:8 and 12.*

⁵ *Psalm 46: 2, MT*

⁶ *Psalm 46:8 and 12.*

We, you, are human. That means that, even though you are a person who God has bought back from the wages of sin – death and eternal separation from Him – you are still human. Your Old Nature still clings to you. The world still tempts you. The devil remains willing to devour you, and us, and the Church. And, you may fear.

The devil still wears many masks as he tries to deceive us. In the Church, his disguises are not often in the form of zombies, vampires, or the like. Rather, he can be discovered veiling himself in the images we would expect of the holy – in particular the Holy One, Jesus the Christ. The devil, we know, goes about as a roaring lion – a direct imitation of the Lion of the tribe of Judah – Jesus. The devil masquerades as an angel of light – Lucifer – a brilliant yet less glorious person than the God who dwells in inaccessible light. The deceiver cloaks himself in Scripture, dividing it to support his deception. The old evil foe of the redeemed twists the Word of God to his own ends – to wound God by tricking you, and the Church in various places, into falling away from the rightly divided Word of God.

That is nothing new. The reformers whom God raised up beheld the deceiver as veiled in the robes of the Church. He pronounced that his word and decretals, the Church Fathers, the canons and the like were the prime interpreters of the Word of God. He changed the clear meanings of the Word of God to suit his own ends – to control of those who were in the Church. The evil one moved people in the Church toward trusting in their own good words, works, and thoughts to make themselves right with

God. He led them away from Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of all their sins to Christ plus their own satisfactions.

He is at it again. Cloaked in white, he has again begun to open the doors of the Church to unrepentant sinners in new, for our era, ways. From centuries of placing mediators other than Jesus the Son of God between God the Father and humans, he has drawn the Church in her various parts away from the Jesus of the Scriptures. The Devil is now working, once again through Saint Peter's chair, to declare sin, "not sin." Oh, he is getting some push back from some of the conservative "men-in-red." But, that may not last long. The Church's bureaucracy will overwhelm them and their objections - which will likely be formed in any event on the basis of tradition, apart from a firm grounding of Scripture. For the man in white, the men in red, and a lot of men in black, that foundation was lost before God raised up His reformers in the 1500's.

Such issues are troubling the Church. They are causing divisions, and so they are fulfilling the will of the Anti-Christ. Added to them are the terrors of the nations, even the non-nations which are even now imposing their religion upon parts of the world.

The Lord knows about them. He declares in the Psalm what will happen. He informs the hearer that the earth will give way (earthquakes); mountains will fall into the sea (volcanoes); the oceans will rage (hurricanes and tsunamis). The Holy Spirit tells the faithful that nations will rage and kingdoms fall (as they have been doing since the first nations were founded).

The Lord declares Who really is in control. He is watching over, and restraining, and controlling all the evil that we have unleashed upon ourselves. God has kept some of the men-in-black to hold fast to His Word, to preach His truth, to administer His sacraments to His people.

In the midst of all that terrifies us, God's Word stands. Through that Word He has given us a river in the Holy City. That brings forth the living waters which flow from Jesus. They bring forgiveness, life and salvation through Holy Baptism. (Which shall be seen among us, God-willing, tomorrow as God baptizes little Leah).

In faithful places such as this God is in the midst of His Holy City. Though us, His light shines forth on His people through His Word. Here, in His means of grace, is the Voice of God. He declares His will, and His people are saved now and in eternity. These divine realities, declared in time, this time, move His people, you, to declare:

Elohim (is) to us Refuge and Strength, Help in pressures well proved.⁷ And, two times: YHWH Sabaoth (is) with us; dwelling place for us (is) Elohe of Jacob. (Selah)⁸

Hear God's invitation to His people which flows forth from Him after those words:

All of you come! All of you behold (the) works (of) YHWH which he made: desolations in earth. He causes wars to cease, to (the) ends of the earth. (The) bow He breaks, and shatters (the) spear; chariots He burns with fire.⁹

God is promising that which presses in upon us, that which bears down upon you will end. You know that promise to be true because God declared all that was

⁷ Psalm 46: 2, MT

⁸ Psalm 46:8 and 12.

⁹ Psalm 46:9-10.

needed to rescue you in time into eternity was done on the cross by Jesus. There, He declared that all was finished. That frees you to follow God's call in the midst of this world's pressures. It enables and empowers His Church, even when steeples are falling to:

*Be still and know that I (am) Elohim. (I am) exalted in (the) nations. (I am) exalted in (the) earth.*¹⁰

The same God Who, with His Word, stilled the wind and the waves, calls out to His troubled Church. He calls us to stillness. He will us to know, deep in our hearts, that He alone is God. You have proof that sustains that knowledge. God is lifted up in the nations – in you who have been born not of Jewish mothers but of the Water and the Word. God is exalted in the world wherever and whenever the true Church is revealed – through His purely preached Word and rightly administered Sacraments. That moves His people, you in this age, to declare, *Our victory has been won; the Kingdom ours remaineth* (LSB 656). In that verse, we declare of the Word of God: *YHWH Sabaoth (is) with us; dwelling place for us (is) Elohe of Jacob.* (Selah)¹¹

Please stand and receive God's All-Hallowed Eve's gift:

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Reformation Festival (LSB One-year series)

Psalm 46; Revelation 14:6-7; Romans 3:19-28; Matthew 11:12-19

October 31, 2014

Pastor Michael H. Morehouse

Soli Deo Gloria

¹⁰ Psalm 46:11.

¹¹ Psalm 46:8 and 12.

NOTES:

And I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven, having (the) eternal Gospel, (which he was proclaiming) - Good News upon the ones continually sitting upon the earth - and upon every nation and tribe and tongue and people - saying in (a) great voice: "All of you fear God, and all of you give Him glory, because it comes - the hour of His judgment. Also, all of you worship the One making the heavens and the earth and seas and springs of water!"¹²

¹² Revelation 14:6-7.