

- 46:1 God is our refuge and strength,  
 a very present help in trouble.
- 2 Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,  
 though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
- 3 though its waters roar and foam,  
 though the mountains tremble at its swelling.
- 4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
 the holy habitation of the Most High.
- 5 God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;  
 God will help her when morning dawns.
- 6 The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;  
 he utters his voice, the earth melts.
- 7 The LORD of hosts is with us;  
 the God of Jacob is our fortress.
- 8 Come, behold the works of the LORD,  
 how he has brought desolations on the earth.
- 9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;  
 he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;  
 he burns the chariots with fire.
- 10 “Be still, and know that I am God.  
 I will be exalted among the nations,  
 I will be exalted in the earth!”
- 11 The LORD of hosts is with us;  
 the God of Jacob is our fortress.

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

This psalm has been used a lot in the past couple of years in the midst of the pandemic and a virus that still assails us, not that the psalm had not brought us comfort before. Of course, it had. Its opening verses are a firm confession of that comfort: *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”* It’s a reminder that *“The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”*

Martin Luther’s famous hymn, *“A Mighty Fortress”* was based on this psalm. *“Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott”* in German — a strong castle is our God. You might think that Luther would have used the same word — Burg — to translate the psalm into German, after all it’s translated into English as “fortress”, but it’s not so. Our English phrase “the God of Jacob is our fortress” is translated by Luther as *“der Gott Jakobs ist unser Schutz”* — our protection. In fact, the Wartburg Castle served as Luther’s protection after his bold confession in Worms on April 18, 1521, 500 years ago this year: “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or

by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen” (*Luther’s Works*, 32:112-13).

Luther was in trouble after that confession; his life was at risk. But Luther’s heart had been troubled long before that. I’m sure you remember your Reformation history, but it’s worth repeating for the sake of our memory. Luther was an Augustinian monk and priest. He became troubled with the corruption he saw in the church, in particular with the commercialization of the church in the selling of indulgences and the duping of the poor German peasants into buying these indulgences, these papers that guaranteed release from sins or from time in purgatory. Penance and indulgences and purgatory were all part of a larger penitential system that was corrupt and needed reforming. In response, on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517, Luther nailed 95 Theses — statements for debate — onto the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany. And this event marked the beginning of the Reformation, which we celebrate on this date 504 years later.

But little did Luther know then what this little act would do. Little did he understand the trouble he had just stirred up. Little did he understand how hard both church and empire would bear down on him. Little did he realize how much he would have to listen to this psalm and trust in God as his mighty fortress in order to get him through the tumultuous times ahead.

Though Luther had been trained up in an Augustinian monastery, trained in the ways of canon law, this training did not calm his troubled heart. He feared for his eternal salvation; he feared for his soul for eternity, for the monastic training he received only taught him what he had to do to inherit salvation. But as we have heard in recent weeks “*with man it is impossible*” (Mark 10: 27); and again St. Paul teaches us today, “*by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight*” “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*”

Luther was troubled by his sins and would spend hours in the confessional, confessing on his knees every sin he could think of. Luther knew that God was righteous and he was not. Luther knew that his unrighteousness deserved condemnation. Based on that alone, he was right in fearing a righteous God who could melt the earth with a mere utterance.

I wonder how many of us could go for more than a minute or two in naming our sins. Indeed, we should probably be more like Luther, fearing God because of our sin. But also Luther didn’t understand the Gospel at first.

And so,

until through God's word, Luther learned that God was his refuge and strength—not he himself;

until Luther learned that God came down from the heavenly city of God to be in the midst of sinners as their Savior and not their stern judge;

until Luther learned that God in Jesus came as mankind's helper, doing for mankind in his trouble what mankind could not do for himself;

until he learned to be still and listen to Jesus, to abide in Him and His word, to boast in Him and His grace for us;

not until then did Luther receive the comfort that he sought, the assurance that because of Jesus' great forgiving work on the cross, having atoned for the sins of the world, that he was righteous before God;

not until then did Luther, having passed through the river of Holy Baptism, that makes glad the city of God, come to understand that he was truly saved by God's free grace and favor, and that the "*holy habitation of the Most High*" would also be his.

Only then is when his courage kicked in, and he could say, in effect, "*Therefore we will not fear ...*," as the psalmist writes. "I cannot do otherwise; here I stand."

Yes, Luther would come to know the Gospel, and, thanks to Luther, we know it, too. We know the solution to our problem of sin — it comes from God Himself, our refuge and strength, our help in trouble.

"Ask ye who is this? Jesus Christ it is!" Yes, the solution is Jesus Christ, God's own beloved Son come down to us in the flesh to bear God's wrath and condemnation for us. The solution is Jesus Christ, the sinless Lamb of God sacrificed unto death for our sins. The solution is Jesus Christ, risen from the grave, the victor over sin, and death, and the grave, who gives us of the fruit of His victory. The solution is Jesus Christ, who by His death earned forgiveness and life and salvation for the world, and who by His word and Sacraments bestows these upon us.

Dear friends, the world is filled with trouble. Waters still roar. Mountains still tremble. Nations still rage. These are not our help. These are the fruit of sin and its corruption that afflict us. No! God is our help. He is our refuge and strength. He is our Savior. Listen to Him and abide in His words — by these we are truly His disciples. Look to His words attached to the water poured over you — by these He made you His disciples and united you to His body. Look to His words spoken

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over bread and wine — by these He serves up His body and blood for your forgiveness and strengthens you in your troubles on your pilgrimage.

Look to Jesus, “of Sabaoth Lord,” and say with confidence: “*The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.*” Look to Jesus, who is ever “by our side,” and sing boldly: “And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife, Though these all be gone, Our vict’ry has been won; The Kingdom ours remaineth!”

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.