

Psalm 46
October 29, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” rolled the words over and over again off the tongue of a man who had been plagued his entire life with anxiety that even modern medicine couldn’t control. Day in and day out fear besieged him. He had moments in which the medicine, talk therapy, and support of family and friends helped ease the burden of this condition but more often than not the agony of being engulfed in the seemingly inescapable chaos of this dreaded illness would once again resurface. It was difficult for him to explain just what happened in those times. How his body and mind simply couldn’t offer to him the reality he was safe. Yet, in the midst of those fears he found a bit of respite and solace in the repetition of the introductory words of Psalm 46, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

They were a river of hope. The soothing sound of a gentle stream’s waters cascading over the undulations of pebbles and rocks. They were words of life. While storms rage in life that take all forms – natural disasters, political unrest, war, mental or physical duress and a host of so many other possibilities – there was a promise that God was present. As his world teetered on the edge of out of control nearly every waking minute God was the constant. God was the rock he clung to for stability. While we can’t always understand why illness continues, tragedies happen, and God seemingly allows them to exist in and affect the people and all of creation God so loves we do join with God’s people, as they have done throughout all eternity in the face of a broken and fallen world, in placing our trust, confidence and hope in the promise that, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

On this Reformation Sunday we remember and give thanks for the work of so many all those years ago who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, were opened to the river of God's word that spoke truth into the midst of long held theological claims that failed to bring life and the surety of God's refuge and presence but rather brought a torrential storm of fear and enslaved the vast majority of the church to the depths of despair and the encounter of a God whose love could be bought. The encounter of a God whose proper work seemed more about condemnation, judgement, wrath, and sending sinners to the depths of hell rather than the God found in Psalm 46, which is a God at work overcoming the evil forces of the world and being present with the world in its suffering. A God intent on providing safety and refuge. This is the God we meet in Christ Jesus. A God for all – not just some. A savior for the world – not just a few who deem themselves righteous. A God of grace opening up the flood gates to experience the freedom of forgiveness. A God entering into the midst of this broken world and continuing to instill in our hearts the faith to trust the word of God which soothes our bodies parched through sin and death with the refreshing water that quenches through the word of God that says, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." The river of life flows on in endless song through the words of the Apostle Paul that proclaim,

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ... For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. (Romans 3:21-24, 28)

These words speak of the truth, that is Jesus Christ, who sets us free (John 8:36). They set Luther free. They set his fellow reformers free. Free from sin. Free from death. Free from fear. Free to encounter the God who is our refuge and strength. Free to encounter a God of grace and forgiveness. Free from the burden of trying to live up to God's standards and earn God's favor and free simply to love God and love

one's neighbor. This is the amazing news we celebrate this Sunday, Reformation Sunday, but it isn't reserved for this Sunday. It is celebrated each and every Sunday we proclaim the mystery of faith, "Jesus Christ has died. Jesus Christ has risen. Jesus Christ will come again."

Today is about remembering and giving thanks. But it can't be only about that. It is a day that we must look forward as well and ask the question, what might be the Spirit's reforming work that needs to be done in the church to this day? Even right here at Bethany? What might we need to be freed from communally and personally to fully give ourselves to the mission Jesus calls us to? What fears do we have? What grudges do we harbor? What past guilt continues to bind us? What divisions continue to separate us? The church has changed dramatically since Luther posted those 95 theses to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany October 31, 1517. Without change, reform would never have been possible? Change is hard. Uncomfortable. At times it brings much sorrow and grief. However, change is also a fruit of the Spirit that breathes life and refreshing waters into parts of the church that have become stagnant over the decades. Where do we need that water? Yes, we cherish and rejoice in the memories. The stories of our past. The saints who have gone before. Yet, we pray for the future. For the Spirit to open us up to new beginnings and new life. And in the midst of it all we give thanks to God for being our refuge and strength amidst the storms. For Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who meets us in the midst of it all and gives life and salvation to the world through his death and resurrection.

Luther was known to say to his colleague, Philip Melancton, "Come, Philip, let us sing together Psalm 46. Today, tomorrow, and each and every day thereafter we too sing with saints of old, the saints of today, and the saints of tomorrow, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in of trouble. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."