

## Reformation (Series B)

“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #656, 657)

According to blessed Martin Luther, our God is a *feste Burg*. That word *Burg* is one of those nearly untranslatable German words . . . over the years there have been numerous attempts: “A stronghold sure”—“A castle strong”—“A mighty fortress,” the one most of us know best.

In any case, a *Burg* is a high, sturdy, secure place, under the protection of a lord—strategically positioned on high ground. Most consider that the *feste Burg* Luther had in mind was the *Wartburg*, where he was in exile after the momentous Diet of Worms in 1521. Another *Burg*—*feste Coburg*, where he was in exile in 1530—is less well known (though students and friends of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis may recall a dining hall so named).

*Feste Coburg* is yet another German walled fortress that encompasses a whole community. . . so high among the treetops that during his sojourn there—from Good Friday till late Pentecost, April through October 1530—Luther nicknamed it the “kingdom of the birds.”

No one is exactly sure when Luther wrote *ein feste Burg*—he never refers to it in his own writings before 1531—but historians note that he and his secretary/companion Veit Dietrich sang it at least once a day all during their sojourn at Coburg.

Our God is a *feste Burg*, Luther sings, because

“*er hilft uns frei aus aller Not He helps us free from every need  
die uns jetzt hat betroffen. That hath us now o'ertaken.*”

That’s as good a fit for Coburg as for Wartburg . . . all the more when we realize that the word *Not* is in fact much stronger than mere “need”—more like “distress, trouble (or) misery.”

Recall the momentous events of spring and summer 1530. While the other Saxon reformers—princes, pastors and theologians—went on south to Augsburg to “speak of God’s testimonies before kings”(Psalm 119: 46) in the words that we now know as the Augsburg Confession, for his own safety Luther had to stay behind at *Coburg*. Couriers did bring him news and he could function as an advisor, but it was Melanchthon not Luther who was actually “on the ground” in Augsburg.

In short, at *Coburg* Luther experienced *Not* in the extreme. His word for this is *Anfechtungen*, (another untranslatable)—“trials, tribulations, adversities.”

“What does this mean?” you may ask. For starters, he was isolated from his beloved Katie and from his children. Just six weeks earlier, his father had died. As he occupied himself translating the Old Testament (the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel) he fought devils in the air, drank wine and had constant headaches—all the while in fervent prayer for the Reformation movement, which he knew would either sink or swim at Augsburg.

In June 1530, Veit Dietrich sent this letter to Katie from *Coburg*:

“Dear and gracious Mrs. Luther: —Rest assured that your lord and we are hale and hardy by God’s grace. You did well to send the doctor the portrait [of daughter Magdalena], for it diverts him from his worries. He has nailed it on the wall opposite the table where we eat in the elector’s apartment. At first he could not quite recognize her. “Dear me,” said he, “Lenchen is too dark.” But he likes the picture now, and more and more comes to see that it (really) is Lenchen. She is strikingly like Hans in the mouth, eyes, and nose, and in fact in the whole face, and will come to look even more like him.

I just had to write you this.

—Do not be concerned about the doctor. He is in good trim, praise God. The news of his father’s death shook him at first, but he was himself again after two days. When the letter came, he said, “My father is dead.” He took his psalter, went to his room, and wept so that he was incapacitated for two days, but he has been all right since. May God be with Hans and Lenchen and the whole household.” (Quoted in Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, pg. 252)

With *Coburg* in mind now, sing (or read) *A Mighty Fortress*, Stanzas 1, 2, 3 (see below, or LSB 656). And by the way, don't ever sing just stanza one all by itself! For when you sing it with understanding, you will discover that it leaves the whole world in Satan's control, with no one on earth able to stand against him! Luther above all knew that “This was most certainly NOT true!”

Continue by singing (or reading) Stanza 4 . . . but to do it, please turn ahead one page to the other translation (and metric tune) at LSB 657.

We could debate the fine points of translation and tradition, but let me share a story of how a new translation can release the healing power of God for someone to whom it was locked up before. It was the tragic South Dakota floods of the late 1970s, when flash

floods washed savagely through otherwise quiet creek beds and took the lives of whole families of campers. In 1979 I met a woman who told me about losing her husband in those floods—how the water avalanched through their campsite in the middle of the night and he was gone just like that—what her grief and loss and *Anfechtung* felt like—and then how, months later as she sang this hymn at Reformation time, the strength of God flooded her heart from words that had never before meant anything special at all:

“Were they to take our house  
Goods, honor, child or SPOUSE,  
Though life be wrenched away  
They cannot win the day.  
The kingdom's ours forever.”

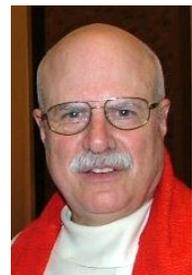
"Never lost a wife," she said—"but I knew how bad it was to lose my spouse."

And lastly. . SURPRISE—there's more! Yet one more stanza remains for us to sing or read. In 1817, for the 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation (just think—we will soon reach the 500<sup>th</sup>!), the great Danish hymnist Nicholai Grundtvig wrote a fifth stanza for *ein feste Burg*.

Grundtvig's stanza is now an orphan, hidden elsewhere in the hymnal under a different number and tune (LSB 582) so that you might never guess . . . but it picks up right where stanza four ended, and it makes a worthy prayer to end these reflections:

God's Word is our great heritage  
and shall be ours forever;  
to spread its light from age to age  
shall be our chief endeavor.  
Through life it guides our way.  
In death it is our stay.  
Lord, grant, while worlds endure  
we keep its teachings pure  
throughout all generations!

Rev. David J. Susan



A mighty fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon;  
he helps us free from ev'ry need that hath us now o'ertaken.  
The old evil foe now means deadly woe;  
deep guile and great might are his dread arms in fight;  
on earth is not his equal.

With might of ours can naught be done, soon were our loss effected;  
But for us fights the valiant One, whom God himself elected.  
Ask ye, "Who is this"?  
Jesus Christ it is, of Sabaoth Lord,  
and there's none other God;  
he holds the field forever.

Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us,  
We tremble not, we fear no ill;  
they shall not overpow'r us.  
This world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will,  
he can harm us none.  
He's judged; the deed is done;  
one little word can fell him.

God's Word forever shall abide, no thanks to foes, who fear it.  
For God himself fights by our side with weapons of the Spirit.  
Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child, or spouse,  
Though life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day.  
The Kingdom's ours forever!

Text: Martin Luther (1483-1546) Sts. 1-3 translation a composite. St. 4 translation from  
*Lutheran Book of Worship*, 1978.

Tune: EIN FESTE BURG

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be downloaded and duplicated for local use.]