

Reformation Sunday (October 26, 2014)

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

“Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott, ein gute Wehr und Waffen” is proudly proclaimed in large print from the top of All Saints’ Church, popularly known as the “Castle Church” in Wittenberg, Germany. From the pen of Dr. Luther comes this bold testimony of faith and courage from Psalm 46. It is the unifying “Battle Hymn of the Reformation”, is it not? Or is it the “Battle Hymn” because there are so many things to fight about, so many deeply ingrained preferences about its use in our congregations. Do we sing it in C Major or D Major? This translation or that one? Does God “help us free from every need” or does God “break the cruel oppressor’s rod”? Do we prefer the isometric version or the rhythmic version?

No matter how we resolve these questions, it remains a pillar of Christian hymnody and a testimony to Luther’s spiritual strength, his musical and poetic talents, and his depth of understanding of the Psalms. Most of us can only imagine the familiarity Luther had with the Psalms. As a monk, the daily offices included the singing of the entire Psalter approximately once a month or in some places once every twenty days. Do the math. In ten years a monk would sing Psalm 46 some 120 times at least! Sometimes I’m jealous. . .

Let’s look at “A Mighty Fortress” as a battle hymn. I know—hymns with military imagery like “Onward Christian Soldiers” and “Fight the Good Fight” are sometimes avoided these days and sometimes viewed almost with suspicion. But the Scripture’s military allusions are legion (if you’ll forgive the pun.) In all seriousness, it’s far too easy to think that warfare imagery was only fitting in Luther’s day when the Roman Church was attacking this new and rebellious bunch of German hooligans with “sword and shield”. The reality is that warfare may be the applicable imagery today as well, as Christians and the Christian Church face contemporary persecution in subtle and some not so subtle ways. And so we sing:

Stanza 1 – The battle lines are drawn; the stage is set...

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

Dr. Luther reminds us that there is a life and death struggle going on in this world—spiritual life and death. As Paul said, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). Take a moment to pray that God would give you the discernment to see the battle lines today and to seek our mighty fortress. (One should never sing only stanza one of “A Mighty Fortress” because it concludes with a statement of the power of Satan.)

Stanza 2 – Our Hero is introduced...

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? (*enter trumpets & organ sforzando*) Jesus Christ it is,
of Sabaoth Lord, and there's none other God;
he holds the field forever.

Here, only ten or twelve years after the nailing of the 95 theses, stands Luther's clear, mature statement of salvation by the work of God and not the work of man. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). Again the terms of battle abound: might, fights, Sabaoth, the battlefield. Take a moment to pray that you may feel once again the elation and confidence in knowing our Captain Christ, and that you may follow Him into your sometimes perilous personal battles. List them.

Stanza 3 – The satanic forces surge...

Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill; they shall not overpower 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.

This is an obvious reference to 1 Peter 5:8, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Considering the political aspects of Luther's struggles, it may also recall Proverbs 28:15, "Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked ruler over a helpless people." But on the brighter side, it recalls the verse that every goblin-frightened child needs to hear: "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." Take a moment to pray that your courage may be that of Christ when facing trials in this world.

Stanza 4 – Live as though the battle is over...

The Word they still shall let remain nor any thanks have for it;
He's by our side upon the plain with His good gifts and Spirit.
And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife,
though these all be gone, our victory has been won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.

We indeed stand on the plain in the aftermath of the battle. The victory of Christ is a "done deal", and that should make a difference in the life we lead. Our place in the Kingdom of God is

assured and we can live joyfully and serve confidently every day. Take a moment to pray that you may live every moment fully aware that Christ is by your side, that He has given you good gifts (musical and otherwise) and that His Spirit lives in you. Then sneer at the powers of Satan in this world and tell that loser to get out of your way! You've got places to go and things to do in the Kingdom of God!

Dig deeper?

1. In stanza one, what are today's manifestations of "deep guile and great might"?
2. What is the "little word" at the end of Stanza 3? "Christ"? "God"? or could Luther mean Satan may be defeated by a few little words like "Get behind me", as the English mean when they say, "May I have a word?" Or is this another of those times when "Word" does not refer to a word, but to THE Word: Jesus Christ (John 1:1) In one of his *Table Talks*, Luther himself suggests that the word is "liar."
3. The first line of stanza four has given translators no end of frustration. Jan Bender, whose native tongue was German, was staring at Stanza 4 and said: "I have always wondered what this means in English: 'Nor any thanks have for it.' Why would we not be thankful for the word of God? In old German, when it says 'kein'n' Dank', 'Dank' is a form of the word 'denken' (thoughts) not 'Danken' (thanks). It means we should not add human thoughts to the word of God!" This would certainly be consistent with Luther's theology. Perhaps it could read:
"The Word they still shall let remain; no human thoughts add to it . . ."
4. If "A Mighty Fortress" is a paraphrase of Psalm 46, it is just as much a paraphrase of Romans chapter 8. Sometime this week, read "A Mighty Fortress" and then read Romans 8. You'll love it!
5. Sometime just for interest, compare the thought progression of "A Mighty Fortress" with that of "The Star Spangled Banner" (once again—all four stanzas). Remarkable similarity!
6. Related Scripture narratives: 2 Chronicles 32:7-23, Philippians 3:12-14, Matthew 28:18-20

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