

October 29, 2023
Psalm 46

Reformation Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“What Does This Mean?”

“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth.”

What does this mean?

If that question sounds familiar to you, chances are you are a veteran of a Lutheran Confirmation program which centered on the study of Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism*, which is still the central study guide for confirmands in Lutheran congregations around the world. While our celebration of Reformation Sunday centers on Luther’s posting his “*Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*,” better known as the Ninety-Five Theses, on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517, there is no doubt that among all of Luther’s writings the *Small Catechism* continues to have the greatest impact on Lutherans. The Catechism has its origins in 1529, when Luther began to publish explanations on the “chief parts” of the Christian faith – the Ten Commandments, Creed, and Lord’s Prayer – on individual sheets that were sold for a few pennies each. Printers in Wittenberg and elsewhere collected these sheets and published them in what they called an *enchiridion*, or handbook. Luther added a preface, which told pastors how to use the book, and attached other sections to the book. By the end of the year, printers gave the book a subtitle by which it is known today: *The Small Catechism of Martin Luther*.

Catechisms were a well-known method of education in Luther’s time. As early as AD 400, Latin-speaking Christians used the word “catechism” to describe the basic instruction given to new Christians. By the Middle Ages, “catechism” had come to mean the three things that all Christians should know: the Ten Commandments, the Apostles Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer. Pastors were required to teach these three things to all adults and children and to preach on them during weekday services four times a year. Many of Luther’s sermons on the catechism were collected into what is known today as the *Large Catechism*. While Luther’s Catechism is rooted in this long-standing tradition, he made some changes and additions in his volume. He changed the order from the Lord’s Prayer, Creed, and Ten Commandments (which is maintained in our baptism service) so that the Ten Commandments lead on to the Creed and then the Lord’s Prayer. Luther also added explanations on the sacraments

– Holy Baptism and Holy Communion – as well as teachings on confession, the Office of the Keys, and prayers for morning and evening as well as before and after meals. While it has been taught in congregations for centuries, the *Small Catechism* was written simply so that parents could teach their children what it means to be a Christian, a baptized child of God.

One of the greatest innovations that Luther made to his catechism was the simple question that is asked again and again: “*What does this mean?*” While other pastors in Luther’s day wrote catechisms with many complicated questions and answers, Luther challenged his readers to consider what the aspects of faith meant in their daily lives. What does it mean to believe in “*God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth*”? What does it mean when we hear that “*you shall have no other gods before me*”? What does it mean when we pray “*give us this day our daily bread?*”

Luther’s simple but profound question draws on a tradition that can be heard in today’s psalm, which had a profound impact on Luther’s life and faith. Psalm 46 is fundamentally an affirmation of faith in God, a song of confidence and trust. The psalm begins with a threefold description of the God in whom the people believe: “*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*” (46:1). “Refuge” (*mahseh*) is one of the most important words in the book of Psalms; to “take refuge in God” means to trust God, another key theme in the Psalter:

- “But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, so that those who love your name may exult in you.” – 5:11.
- “In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.” – 22:4-5.
- “Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.” – 62:8.

Psalm 46 begins “*with the affirmation that God is a reliable refuge; God is worthy of trust*” (J. Clinton McCann, Jr.). Underlying this affirmation is the conviction that God rules the world; God’s strength and power lies behind the origin and continuing life of the universe. God is in control – not the wicked or the enemies of the nations that regularly threaten the life of the psalmist or the existence of God’s people:

- “O how abundant is your goodness that you have laid up for those who fear you, and accomplished for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of

everyone! In the shelter of your presence you hide them from human plots; you hold them safe under your shelter from contentious tongues.” – 31:19-20.

The God who is the refuge for God’s people is also their “strength” (*oz*), which points to the conviction of God’s sovereignty: God can be trusted because God rules the world. The psalmist affirms that the strength behind the universe is not simply a neutral power; rather, God is “for us” (the Hebrew literally reads “*God is for us a refuge and strength*”). God’s power is inclined toward our “help” in times of trouble, in which we have the assurance that God is present with us in moments for distress (“*But you, O LORD, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!*” – 22:19).

This bold affirmation of faith and trust in God leads to the psalmist challenging his readers to consider “*what does this mean?*” To illustrate how powerful a help God can be in trouble, these verses present the ultimate “worst-case scenario” that the people may encounter: “*Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters rage and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.*” (46:2-3). According to the ancient middle eastern view of the universe, the mountains were both the foundations that anchored the dry land amid the watery chaos and the pillars that held up the sky. Thus, the worst thing that could happen would be for the mountains to shake or tremble, for the earth would be threatened from below by water and from above by the sky’s falling. Even in this degree of trouble – when the very structures of the universe as we know it cannot be depended upon, when our world is falling apart our God is still a reliable refuge; God can be trusted. Therefore, this astounding affirmation in the face of the ultimate worst-case scenario is “*we will not fear,*” echoing the words of another psalmist who proclaimed that “*even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me*” (Psalm 23:4).

The psalmist turns his attention to troubles among nations and kingdoms; even when “*the nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter*” (46:6), there is one point of stability and confidence for those who put their trust in God:

- “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God shall help it when the morning dawns.” – 46:4-5.

The pattern of repetition emphasizes the assurance that God’s presence can be solidly depended upon, that “*in the midst of international and even cosmic chaos, God can*

be trusted.” (McCann). This trust is echoed in the chorus of the psalm, which states that “*the LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge*” (46:7, 11). The term “LORD of hosts” is associated elsewhere in the Old Testament with the Ark of the Covenant, God’s symbolic throne among God’s people:

- “‘Why has the LORD put us to rout today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, so that he may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.’ So the people sent to Shiloh, and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD, who is enthroned on the cherubim.” – 1 Samuel 4:3-4.

The title also has a military background, since “hosts” (*saba’ot*) can also mean “armies” (“*You came to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.*” (1 Samuel 17:45). In this context, “refuge” also functions as a military term; God is a warrior, but one who wages peace. This peace is seen in the psalmist’s description of a “river”; the chaotic waters have become a life-giving stream. This river is symbolic (there are no rivers in Jerusalem); it is a river that yields the sustenance of life, another way of symbolizing the assurance of God’s power and provision, even amid the worst imaginable trouble.

- “On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.” – Ezekiel 47:12.

“The presence of God means help when the world should threaten to undo us.” (McCann).

Another indication of God’s sovereignty is God’s powerful voice: “*he utters his voice, the earth melts.*” (46:6b). “The earth melts” occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe poetically the effects of God’s appearing (“*The mountains quake before him, and the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who live in it.*” – Nahum 1:5). Such “melting” also includes God’s melting human opposition to enact the divine will (“*Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed; trembling seized the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away.*” – Exodus 15:15). God’s presence means protection for God’s people, who are not invited to “*come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth.*” (46:8). The invitation to “come and see” calls to mind Philip’s invitation to Nathaniel in the Gospel of John (“*Nathaniel said to him, ‘Can anything*

good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’” – John 1:46). God is the mighty warrior who wages peace on behalf of God’s people, the God who “makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.” (46:9). This is the God of whom Isaiah prophecies as the God who will turn instruments of destruction into tools of abundance and nourishment:

- “In days to come the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his path.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” – Isaiah 2:2-4.

In the presence of the Lord God of power and might who uses God’s power for the purpose of established peace among all peoples, God’s people are called to *“be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth.”* (46:10). The call to “be still” is not a call to meditation or relaxation, but a call to “stop” or “throw down your weapons.” It is a call to depend on the God who is “exalted,” used elsewhere in the context of both earthly kings and of God as king (*“Extol the LORD our God, worship at his footstool. Holy is he!”* – Psalm 99:5). Whereas Israel often sought security in military might, the psalm affirms that ultimate security lies in God alone; the people are called to *“depend on God instead of yourselves.”* (McCann).

- “Faced with the temptation to self-assertion, yet aware of its frightening results, we hear in Psalm 46 the good news that our ultimate security lies not in our own strength or our own efforts or our own implements, but in the presence and power of God.” – McCann.

Martin Luther treasured Psalm 46 as one of the biblical passages in which he found comfort in times of hardship, anguish, and persecution: *“In such times we can rightfully bestir and strengthen ourselves with God’s help in such a way that we can be bold, alert, and cheerful, committing our cause to God’s gracious and fatherly will”* (1530). Psalm 46 became the inspiration for Luther’s best-known hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, which may be described as *“a celebration of the*

sovereign power of God over all earthly and spiritual forces, and of the sure hope we have in him because of Christ.” (Louis Benson). The hymn depicts the God described in the psalm as *“our refuge and strength”* as *“a mighty fortress ... a bulwark never failing; our shelter he, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.”* It speaks of a worst-case scenario in which *“hordes of devils fill the land, all threatening to devour us,”* in which we face the loss of *“our house, goods, honour, child, or spouse.”* But as the psalmist states that *“we will not fear”* because of our confidence that *“the LORD of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold,”* Luther boldly proclaims that *“we tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us ... they cannot win the day. The kingdom’s ours forever!”* The hymn has been described as *“the Marseillaise of the Reformation,”* the *“national anthem of the Lutheran Church,”* and a hymn which *“embodied in its words and melody so much of the character of its author – bold, confident, defiant in the face of opposition”* (Benson).

- *“Richly quarried, rugged words set to majestic tones marshal the embattled hosts of heaven. The hymn to the end strains under the undertones of cosmic conflict as the Lord God of Sabaoth smites the prince of darkness grim and vindicates the martyred saints.”* – Roland H. Bainton.

On Reformation Sunday, we remember and celebrate our Lutheran history and heritage which began as a reform movement that called the church to be faithful to its calling to be *“a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”* (1 Peter 2:9). While we celebrate this legacy that has been passed down to us, we are again challenged by Luther’s central question in his Catechism that remains an important tool to help us understand our lives as children of God’s people who have been *“sealed by the Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever”* (ELW Holy Baptism). The *Small Catechism*, along with all of Scriptures, are not meant to be mere historical documents speaking of God’s people in ancient times, but living words that speak to us words of comfort and assurance, words that challenge us to consider *“what does this mean?”* for us in our daily lives. We live in a world that is filled with fear, violence, hatred; we live in a world in which worst-case scenarios may seem to be all too real. But the words of assurance that comforted the people of Israel, the words of blessed hope that were a source of strength for Luther in his darkest hours, are words that call us to trust and hope in God no matter how dire our circumstances may be; for we live in that blessed assurance that *“a mighty fortress is our God ... the LORD of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold ... God’s kingdom is ours forever!”*

Amen.