

Where Would You Be without Your Faith?

Psalm 46

Sunday – 10-27-24

Pastor Vern Christopherson

Where would you be without your faith? I asked our confirmands this question. Their responses ranged from less happy, less hopeful, less secure, and less kind, to more mixed up, more alone, and more depressed. Where would you be without your faith?

Martin Luther needed all the faith he could find and then some. The year was 1517. The date was October 31, All Hallows' Eve, the eve before All Saints Day. Luther was a German priest who was deeply troubled by practices going on in the church of his day, especially practices concerning the dear, departed saints. He didn't want the saints or anyone worrying that they somehow had to earn God's love and favor. That's not what God's grace is about, said Luther.

Along a similar line, Luther didn't approve of indulgences being bought and sold. An indulgence was intended to lessen one's punishment in purgatory. Strictly speaking, an indulgence was a gift, but it was often linked to one's ability to make a contribution to church projects. The all-too-cozy arrangement between forgiveness and money left a sour taste in Luther's mouth.

Thoroughly fed up with the church, Luther grabbed a piece of paper and a pen and wrote down 95 theses (or 95 points) he was hoping to debate. He posted them on the community bulletin board, which was the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. It was the beginning of what would someday be called the Reformation.

Luther wrote things such as: 1) The Bible is the central religious authority – not the church; 2) Only God can grant salvation – not a priest; and 3) It's nonsense to teach that a dead soul in purgatory can be saved by money. As you might imagine, Luther got the attention of church authorities, and in a hurry. What he may not have realized, however, is that his propositions – his protest – would have enormous implications for what was coming down the road.

Before you know it, there was a price on Luther's head. He was forced to retreat. He put on a disguise and spent 10 months hiding in Wartburg Castle.

Luther wasn't simply cowering in fear, however. He used the time to translate the Bible, from Latin into the everyday language of the people. Certain scripture passages such as Psalm 46 took on special significance for him. As he hid out at Wartburg, Luther's regular refrain became: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

Where would Martin Luther have been without his faith? Maybe a lot less courageous. Maybe even hanging on for dear life. He wrote his famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" as a commentary on Psalm 46. He was declaring what an incredible refuge and strength God could be in every time of trouble. Despite being hidden away in a castle, Luther kept writing. And he kept trusting.

"God is our refuge and strength!" Do you believe it? Sometimes it's about the hardest thing in the world to believe. Take a look around, says the psalmist: *the mountains are shaking in the heart of the sea*. Climate change seems to be happening and it might be getting worse. We can't bury our head in the sand and pretend that we don't at least need to study it.

Take a look around: *The nations rage, the kingdoms totter*. Israel has been at war with Hamas for over a year and now with Hezbollah too. Untold numbers of civilians have died. And let's not forget the bloody battles in Ukraine.

In the face of such troubles, it's easy to turn faith into a work that we *must* do: *Gotta' have faith. Gotta' be strong. Gotta believe*. But let's be honest: sometimes it's all we can *do* to hang on for dear life. Sometimes it's all we can *do* to keep trusting that someone a lot bigger than us hears our prayers, and cares about us, and promises to help us in time of need.

Please know: faith is not something we can manufacture; it's a gift from God. Another word for faith is *trust*. A central teaching of the Reformation was this: "We are saved by grace through faith. This is not our own doing, it's a gift from God." Faith often develops over time as we learn how to trust. Often – and I say this carefully – it comes as a result of life's troubles. We might not always *feel* our faith, and it might not always *seem* strong. But at its core, faith is not about us and our goodness. It's about God and God's goodness toward us.

Psalm 46 continues: "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." Whether we're facing climate change, or wars around the world, or hard-fought political elections at home, there's a

song for us to sing, come what may: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

Another central teaching of the Reformation was this: “The church must always be reformed.” It’s not as if the church of Luther’s day was wrong about everything and Luther was right about everything. No, the church is always in need of reform. Change is sometimes just around the corner, and that gives us hope.

Ever since the coming of Covid, many churches have been focusing on their digital footprint. That’s been true at Good Shepherd as well. Strengthening technology was particularly significant during the Reformation. In fact, the Reformation might never have happened if not for advances in technology.

In 1450, Johannes Gutenberg created a machine that revolutionized how information and ideas were spread. He invented a printing press that used movable metal type. Combine that with newly developed paper that didn’t involve animal skins, and that meant copies of Martin Luther’s 95 theses could spread like wildfire throughout Germany and the rest of Europe. And Luther’s translation of the Bible was soon available for almost every household, and as a help to children and illiterate adults, it came with pictures.

Luther was a keen thinker. He wrote at least 30 tracts that went out to hundreds of thousands of people. Suddenly he was having the debate with church authorities for which he longed. The protest was on. People were connecting in a way they’d never connected before. Indeed, the Protestant Reformation was turning the Church of the 16th century upside down.

No doubt, the printing press and the new kind of paper were key developments, but they were merely tools. Luther insisted that the church’s hope must be centered on the Word. “God’s Word forever shall abide,” he wrote in his hymn, “no thanks to foes who fear it; for God himself fights by our side, with weapons of the Spirit. If they take our house, goods, fame, child, or spouse, wrench our life away, they cannot win the day. The kingdom’s ours forever.”

So, is that Word making a difference for you these days? I hope so! “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” That is our song. I am here to proclaim that God is faithful, and God’s faithfulness stands the test of time.

Friends, whatever troubles you may be facing, you can trust God's Word! And here's the primary reason why. Long after Psalm 46 was composed, this Word took on human flesh and lived among us. It was Jesus the Christ, the one called Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus came to create faith within us and to help us to trust. He came to show us how to love each other, especially those who aren't very lovable. Indeed, he came to show us the very heart of God. According to Luther, peel back the layers of this God of ours and you'll quickly discover that God is all about grace. And God's grace is free.

Brennan Manning writes: "Grace is sufficient even though we huff and puff with all our might to try to find something or someone it cannot cover. But grace is enough. Jesus is enough."

Confirmants and all who are gathered here with them, *where would you be without your faith?* No matter where you're finding yourself *these days*, why not put your trust in the grace-filled God we meet in Jesus. It might be just the help you need. Amen.