# SERMON SERIES: THEN SINGS MY SOUL

# “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”

*Psalm 46*

Today we continue our four-week sermon series entitled “Then Sings My Soul.” In this series we are taking one of the great hymns of the church and exploring its lyrics to discover the theology it teaches. We are also looking at a contemporary song that echoes the same theology.

 ***You and I occupy a place in a branch of Christianity known as Protestantism. There are two other main branches of the church—Roman Catholicism and Orthodox. But until 1517 AD there were only two branches. If you were a Christian, you belonged to an Orthodox church—such as Russian or Greek Orthodox—churches found in the east. Or you were Catholic, the only expression of western Christianity.***

 **ASK:** **Does anyone remember what happened on October 31, 1517? Let me give you a hint: it has everything to do with why October 31 is also known as “Reformation Day.”**

 ***On October 31, a Catholic monk and theology professor named Martin Luther did a radical and dangerous thing. He publicly nailed a list of 95 complaints against the Catholic Church to the door of his church. These 95 complaints decried the corruption, greed, and abuses of power rampant in the Holy Mother Church. People were assessed a fee to “release” the souls of their loved ones from Purgatory—a practice known as “the selling of indulgences.” Avaricious clerics and politically-minded popes fleeced the populous for money, promising them forgiveness of their sins or the salvation of the dead, and threatening excommunication if they didn’t pay up.***

 ***Martin Luther grew weary and disgusted with the worldliness and depravity of the Catholic clergy. So he put his concerns in writing and with a dramatic flourish, hammered the parchment containing his 95 complaints to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church. After several years of disputes with the Pope and other leaders, Luther was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church in 1520 and all his writings were ordered burned.***

***Despite the Church’s power and authority, Luther's influence increased and the Reformation—as it came to be known--spread across Europe. Those who agreed with Luther’s views were labeled “protestants,” from which we get the word* Protestant*.***

***The Protestant Reformation brought many new changes to the church as it pulled farther and farther away from its Catholic parent. Luther firmly believed that the Scriptures should be available to people in their native languages so they could read it for themselves--instead of having it read in Latin and interpreted by Catholic priests.***

***One of the greatest benefits of the Reformation was the rediscovery of congregational singing. Martin Luther made singing once more the joy of the entire congregation rather than the sole duty of the choir. He even allowed the women to sing with the men in public, a privilege that had been withheld from them for many years.***

During his lifetime, Luther wrote 36 hymns. His most popular—it became something of a “campaign slogan” and rallying cry during the days of the Reformation—and his most enduring is “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” Let’s turn to our Scripture reading, Psalm 46. You may also want to keep your bulletin insert handy as we look at the song.

 Historians have been unable to pinpoint the exact date this hymn was composed, although it was something around 1529. So this would have been written approximately twelve years after Luther posted his 95 complaints.

 Neither can historians accurately identify the exact reason behind the hymn’s composition. Some believe Luther was suffering from severe depression at the time and wrote the hymn as a courageous reminder of God’s power and presence. Some believe Luther composed the hymn in the face of a devastating plague that was sweeping the land. Others believe he wrote it as a response to the evils that beset him. As a result of his radical actions against the Catholic Church, Luther faced years of trials and persecution. He was the target of assassination attempts. Many other reformers who followed him had been persecuted and burned at the stake.

 Luther based “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” on the words of Psalm 46. Those words, a song itself, say:

*1God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. 2So we will not fear when earthquakes come and the mountains crumble into the sea. 3Let the oceans roar and foam. Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge!*

*4A river brings joy to the city of our God, the sacred home of the Most High. 5God dwells in that city; it cannot be destroyed. From the very break of day, God will protect it. 6The nations are in chaos, and their kingdoms crumble! God’s voice thunders, and the earth melts! 7The Lord of Heaven’s Armies is here among us; the God of Israel is our fortress.*

*8Come, see the glorious works of the Lord: see how he brings destruction upon the world. 9He causes wars to end throughout the earth. He breaks the bow and snaps the spear; he burns the shields with fire. 10“Be still, and know that I am God! I will be honored by every nation. I will be honored throughout the world.” 11The Lord of Heaven’s Armies is here among us; the God of Israel is our fortress.*

 The first verse of “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” says **“A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing; / our helper he** **amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing. For still our ancient foe** **doth seek to work us woe; / his craft and power are great, and** **armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal.”**

 The theology we see being developed in this first verse is that of God’s *omnipotence*—that God is all-powerful. Psalm 46:11 says *…the God of Israel is our fortress.* A mighty fortress is our God… He is all-powerful, able to do anything he desires. Omnipotence is one of the characteristics that we ascribe to God.

One of the beautiful things about this hymn is that all four verses combine to create one seamless story. They are not just separate verses joined together by melody or theme. Each verse ties to the one before it. For example, we end verse one by singing “…his craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal.” Here Luther speaks of Satan, our “ancient foe” who seeks to “work us woe”--or do us in. Then the second verse begins by recognizing our inability to combat Satan: **“Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing…”** No matter how hard we work--and if we rely on our own fortitude--we will still lose against Satan.

**“…were not the right man on our side, the man of God’s own choosing / Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he; / Lord Sabbaoth, his name, from age to age the same, and he must win the battle.”**

So we can’t win the battle against Satan. Luther understood that better than anybody. It takes someone else, someone more powerful than Satan. And Luther said “the right man” for the job is Jesus Christ—and Jesus Christ is on our side! Jesus never changes, he is eternal, and he is omnipotent—fully capable of defeating the Devil’s plans against humanity, church, and creation.

**“And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, / We will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us. / The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him; / his rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him.”**

Again, God’s power is greater than a world full of devils. We do not need to fear Satan. We should respect him, yes, but we do not need to fear him. Our fear should be reserved for God—a reverent, awe-inspiring, holy, humbling fear in the face of God’s omnipotence.

 “…one little word shall fell him.” What word? What single word could be powerful enough to cause Satan’s fall? The end of verse three dovetails directly into the beginning of verse 4 to tell us: **“That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them abideth; / The Spirit and the gifts are ours, / thru him who with us sideth. / Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; / the body they may kill; / God’s truth abideth still; his kingdom is forever.”** That word is “Jesus”—as it was sung in the Philippian church, …*the name above all other names, 10that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father* (Philippians 2:9-11).Or as John wrote, *In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God* (John 1:1).

 While God is indeed all-powerful…*our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble…*to follow him means to put everything on the line. “Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also…” To entrust ourselves to God’s power and presence is to surrender all that we hold and claim. To be a follower of Jesus means sacrifice and service, surrender and suffering.

Luther wrote“…the body they may kill…” This was a harsh reality for him because church officials had dispatched hit men to take Luther out! No doubt Luther was thinking of the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:28-31: *28“Don’t be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29What is the price of two sparrows—one copper coin? But not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. 30And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. 31So don’t be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows.”* How comforting to know that the all-powerful Sovereign of the universe watches over us, protects us, guides us, gifts us, calls us, and saves us.

 There is a contemporary song that echoes the theology of God’s omnipotence. It is entitled “How Great Is Our God,” composed in 2004 by Chris Tomlin. The words are on the back of your bulletin insert and say **“The splendor of a King, clothed in majesty / Let all the earth rejoice, all the earth rejoice / He wraps himself in Light, / and darkness tries to hide / And trembles at His voice, trembles at His voice.”**

The darkness “trembles” before the divine power of the Almighty. In his hymn, Luther wrote “…from age to age the same…” and Chris Tomlin wrote **“Age to age He stands / and time is in His hands / Beginning and the end, / Beginning and the end.”**

 “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” identifies the Trinity—God, Jesus, Spirit—as does “How Great Is Our God;” **“The Godhead Three in One—Father, Spirit, Son .** It also goes on to say **“Name above all names, worthy of our praise…”** which is a direct reaffirmation of the great name of Jesus referenced by Martin Luther.

 So both songs—written 475 years apart—tell us about the indefinable, unconquerable power of God. And together they echo another song, written over 2,500 years before either one, used by the people of Israel in their worship: Psalm 46.

*1God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. 2So we will not fear when earthquakes come and the mountains crumble into the sea. 3Let the oceans roar and foam. Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge!*

*4A river brings joy to the city of our God, the sacred home of the Most High. 5God dwells in that city; it cannot be destroyed. From the very break of day, God will protect it. 6The nations are in chaos, and their kingdoms crumble! God’s voice thunders, and the earth melts! 7The Lord of Heaven’s Armies is here among us; the God of Israel is our fortress.*

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 Let us pray:

 *God, you are our refuge and our strength. You are the one we turn to in times of trouble. We need your presence in our lives. We will not fear, though all creation may revolt. We will trust you, though we do not always understand your ways. We will cling to you and will run to you, Father. Have mercy on us.*

*Even though the nations rage and kingdoms fail, you are still God. Among the hubris of humanity and the noise of our culture, we will seek to be still and will find our rest in you alone. You are with us—our fortress, our hiding place.*

*When we consider the works of your hands, Lord, and remember how you have moved in all of history—and in our lives—we are comforted and take heart. Because of Jesus Christ our hearts sing, knowing that the eternal Lord of hosts is with us. The God of forever is our defender. Amen.*