

**A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD**  
***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Oct. 29, 2017***  
***Based on Psalm 18:2,6,16-19, 46:1,2,7; I Peter 1:24-25***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Here We Stand—Sure Faith in Uncertain Times.” The series is in celebration of an event that took place almost exactly five hundred years ago. In 1517, on the last Saturday of October, which was October 31, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the church door at Wittenberg, which was the decisive act that launched the Protestant Reformation. It is called Protestant, because Luther and others were protesting against what they saw as abuses and false teachings in the medieval Catholic church. It is a Reformation because Luther and others were trying to reform the church. But the leadership in the Catholic church at the time did not appreciate protest and did not want to be reformed. That meant real trouble for Luther. As we saw last week, Luther was excommunicated by Pope Leo X, and condemned by Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire. This did not bode well.

In such times, it is good to have friends, and Luther had one key friend—Frederick the Wise of Saxony, who whisked Luther away from danger and gave him protection in his castle at Wartburg. That castle provides one of the enduring images of the Reformation—the image of the fortress in which one finds refuge.

Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

The world of the 1500’s was chaotic. Nations were constantly squabbling, and warfare broke out frequently. There was corruption in government; rulers were more concerned for their own advancement than for the needs of the people. There was a significant divide between rich and poor, with many struggling to make ends meet. People were worried that Muslims were trying to conquer Europe; the source of that trouble was Turkey, whose Ottoman Empire was expanding. In religion generally, there was a lot of false teaching; and even when the teaching was noble, the behavior of leaders often did not match their words. It all sounds pretty familiar.

In Biblical times, the Psalmist looked out into a world full of chaos and threat, and spoke words which resonate through every age: The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. (Psalm 18:2)

The image of God as a fortress hit home for Luther, particularly because of his experience at Wartburg, where he lived for ten months from 1521 into 1522. He had powerful enemies, in the Catholic church and the government of the Holy Roman Empire, who were seeking his life, and he found literal safe refuge behind the walls of that castle. But he recognized that his real strength and security lay not in those stone walls but in God. For Luther, the fortress would be an abiding image of how we can find a sure defense against all the threats of the world when we put our trust in God.

The fortress image became especially meaningful for Luther five years after he left Wartburg castle. In 1527, he was facing serious personal problems and wrestling with major challenges that were confronting the whole Reformation movement. But again he found strength and hope by putting his trust in God; and most scholars believe that it was in the context of this time of trial and struggle that Luther, around 1527, wrote his most famous hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

You might think of a fortress as a place where you hunker down to escape the pressures of the world. But Luther saw things differently; to him, a fortress defends us from what would destroy us so that we can make an impact on the world. During the months that he was in Wartburg castle, Luther carried out one of the most extraordinary achievements of his life—in just eleven weeks, he translated the New Testament from its original Greek into German, an absolutely groundbreaking event, as he thereby made the Scriptures accessible to the average person, and he did so, even though there were only German dialects at the time, no unified German language—until Luther’s Bible came out, which created the foundation for modern German. Later, in 1527, faced with a host of troubles—from an outbreak of the plague in Wittenberg to a whole series of dissensions among different groups of Reformers—Luther again found a spiritual fortress in God; and he wrote the hymn that became the anthem of the Reformation. Luther’s story is thus an illustration that the toughest times in life can be the most spiritually fruitful times when, in the midst of it all, we find our true refuge in God.

Luther based the hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” on Psalm 46, which says “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea. The Lord of hosts is with us; God is our fortress.” (Psalm 46:1-2,7) The original Hebrew word at the end—*mis-gav*—indicates a high mountain fortress, an impregnable defense. A similar theme is found in Psalm 18 [*The Lord is my fortress . . . Psalm 18:2*] which uses another word for fortress, *metsudah*, indicating a powerful high citadel; it gets transliterated into English as Masada, which of course is the name of the most imposing fortress site that can be seen today in Israel.

Both Psalms depict circumstances of great turbulence and trouble, and both Psalms direct us, in the midst of such circumstances, to find our stronghold in God. This is what Luther did 500 years ago, and the Scriptures encourage us to do the same today. When our world is unstable and we are confronted by great challenge, we need not fear—when our fortress is God.

Along with the fortress image, there is another verse that Luther found to be especially inspiring as he wrestled with vexing circumstances—it was the verse we heard from I Peter, which itself was quoting from the prophet Isaiah—“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” (I Peter 1:24-25, Isaiah 40:8)

Imagine Luther sitting inside Wartburg castle. He is surrounded by turbulence and threat; he sees how everything in this world is so uncertain and frail. But in front of him he has the Scripture, which he is translating into German. And he sees that this is what abides. It is God's Word, proclaiming God's Salvation and God's Promise, that endures through it all. So the phrase, "The Word of the Lord endures forever," which in Latin is, *verbum domini manet in aeternum*, would encapsulate for Luther the one thing solid on this earth. No matter what hit him, Luther could trust that God's Truth—come to full expression in Jesus Christ—would stand firm.

Luther shared his thoughts with Frederick the Wise, who was impressed by this clear message about the strength that we have in God. During this sermon series we have noted that each key idea of the Reformation can finally be summed up in a short Latin phrase. The phrase *verbum domini manet in aeternum* is not especially short; but Frederick the Wise, who was a practical guy, turned it into a logo, VDMA, which he had embroidered in 1522 onto the uniforms of his entire staff. The phrase subsequently took off; as the Reformation gathered steam, the phrase *verbum domini manet in aeternum*, or the shorthand VDMA, began appearing everywhere. It was emblazoned on banners and flags, it was written over doorposts, it was even etched onto horse's armor. This became the motto of the Reformation—the Word of the Lord endures forever—because it spoke to people who were in very uncertain times; it expressed the sure faith that God's Truth will abide and will finally triumph.

Today we find ourselves in extremely chaotic and uncertain times. So it is critical to recognize what there is in life that is truly solid. The Reformation reminds us that it is God's Word that endures and that God alone can be the fortress for our soul. It is significant that in Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," there is a great deal of reference to the terrible forces of evil and the power of sin that surround us—and we certainly see all that today. But at the heart of the hymn is the conviction it is God, acting for our salvation through Jesus Christ, who will defeat evil and bring us at last to everlasting victory. So we can join with Luther and exclaim, "A mighty fortress is our God . . . 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."