

October 31, 2021 (Reformation Day) – Psalm 46

It is good to be back. Disney World was wonderful. It was, truly, perfect trip. Perfect travel. Perfect weather. Perfect experience. Perfect... everything. A lot of great memories.

Our trips to Disney World haven't always been perfect, however. About six years ago, we took a trip that was almost disastrous. I was riding what is still probably my favorite ride, at Disney World or anywhere else. It's called the Rock n Roller Coaster. An indoor coaster that launches you at full speed straight from the platform. Through twists and turns and loops. With the sounds of Aerosmith blaring around you and brightly lit neon guitars racing past you.

When it ended, I began to climb out of the coaster car. Except that the Rock n Roller Coaster is designed so that the car is below the platform you climb out onto. You have to step up onto the platform. And as I pushed off with my left foot, I didn't realize that my right foot wasn't quite clearing the wall of the car. And my toe caught on the side of it.

And I went \*WHAM\* onto the platform. I mean, full-on face-plant. I barely had time to get my hands in front of me to catch my fall. Embarrassed at the blunder, I picked myself and tried to shake it off. And that's when I realized that my knee hurt. And that my knee was bleeding. A lot.

I hobbled to the side and flagged down an attendant for help as the blood began to run down my shin. He looked at me and he said, "Well, there's really only two things you can do. You can either walk all the way to the other end of the park to the first aid station. Or we can call a paramedic."

For a moment I stared at him, weighing the options. I stared at my knee as it began to bleed. I didn't really need a full-fledged paramedic. But I knew I needed help. I couldn't fix this on my own. So I said, "OK. Call the paramedic."

Looking back on it, years later, I know it was right choice. Even if it was a little over the top for what was ultimately just a skinned knee. Within minutes after that call went out, we had three paramedics and a dozen Disney employees buzzing around us. Asking us questions and offering us help. Way more attention than I wanted. But I got what I needed. I got my knee cleaned and bandaged and wrapped by a professional. Which I just couldn't have done on my own.

We all have those moments in our lives when we realize we're in over our head. When something goes completely wrong. When we are scared or hurt or confused or just feeling overwhelmed. When we need help. When we need a professional. To rescue us from disaster. To come in and do what we can't do.

That's really the core message of Psalm 46, that we read earlier. And, not surprisingly, it's also the core message of Luther's famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," which is based on Psalm 46.

Although, for as famous as it is, we don't know much about the circumstances of it's writing. We don't know when Luther wrote it. We don't know specifically why he wrote it. But we really don't need to. Because there were so many events during the Reformation that could have inspired it.

In fact, that was kind of what kept the Reformation moving forward. At every turn, it looked like Luther and the reformers and the nobility supporting them were just going to be swallowed up by the Pope or the Emperor, or even by the Ottoman Empire that was threatening to invade Europe during this entire time too. People don't even remember that one.

From the moment Luther nailed those 95 theses to the door of Wittenburg Cathedral to the day of his death, he was utterly and completely overwhelmed. He needed help. He could not fix the Roman Catholic Church on his own. And as smart and devoted as he was, he still needed to call on his Lord. To rescue him from disaster. To come in and do what he could not possibly do.

Which is what the hymn is all about. Take a look at it, if you will. Look at all the different ways that Luther talks about God's help. God is, of course, our mighty fortress. The castle into which we run for protection from the battle.

But he is also our sword and shield on battlefield. A sword and shield that can break the rod of the oppressor. That can win salvation. The devil is armed to fight. But so are we.

And, yet, even then, we don't have the strength to fight toe-to-toe with Satan himself. But we don't have to. God himself fights by our side. God himself fights in our place. As our champion, who holds the field victorious.

In just those first two verses, Luther describes the help that God provides in three completely different ways. As fortress, as sword and shield, and as champion. As the one who protects us. The one who equips us. And the one who stands in our place altogether.

You can imagine the kind of encouragement a song like this might have been. Whether you're a pastor on trial before the Pope. Or a nobleman on the run from the emperor. Or a soldier on the front lines facing the Ottomans.

And yet, as I said, this is based off of Psalm 46. And actually, it's only a small fragment of what we read there. Because the Psalm goes into even more detail about the help that God provides.

But what's interesting is that it doesn't always sound very helpful at first glance. I mean, hearing about God melting the earth with his voice and about the work of the Lord bringing desolations doesn't seem like it's very helpful. In fact, it sounds rather fearful and destructive.

But that's kind of the point. The help that God provides is largely a matter of perspective. I mean, look at the context for those two statements.

Why is God melting the earth with his voice? Well, because the nations are raging and kingdoms are tottering. But the city of God stands in the midst of all this chaos firm and unmoved.

Basically, the Psalm is saying that out there is nothing but war and uncertainty. A world so insubstantial that it melts at the sound of God's voice. So don't make your home out there, among nations and kingdoms.

Make your home in the city of God. Live inside his mighty fortress. And when his voice speaks, listen to it knowing that the Lord of hosts is with you, without the fear that it will melt the ground underneath you.

The same is true of that second passage. Does the Lord really bring desolations on the earth? Well, yes and no. Because what's the desolation that God brings? Peace. An end to war. The breaking of bows and spears and chariots. Exaltation among the nations. That is God's desolation.

It doesn't sound all that terrible, but consider this: If you're the ruler of a nation - if you're a king or an emperor or a dictator or a president - and God shows up and says, "You're not allowed to wage war anymore. I'm destroying all your weapons. You must bow down to me." That's a pretty desolate message. He is stripping you of all your power. You are no longer ruler anymore.

And if you follow one of those rulers. If you've put your lot with them. Trusted them. Put your faith in kings and princes. Armies and weapons. Well then, from your perspective, God is bringing desolations on the earth. Because he is destroying your country in favor of his kingdom.

But, if you're part of the kingdom of God already. If Jesus is your Lord and you are following him into battle. Well then, that's a pretty awesome message. That God can simply show up and say, "The war is over. I'm taking your weapons away. You're going to worship me now. And there will be peace on earth." That's amazing.

And yet, that's exactly what he has done. He did it for ancient Israel. He did it on Easter morning. He's done it throughout the history of the church.

Including on October 31, 1517. When a monk nailed a piece of paper to the door of his church. And ended up conquering some of the most powerful men in the world. Simply because he had the voice of God speaking for him. Simply because the Lord of hosts was with him. Simply because the God of Jacob was his fortress.

Who do you turn to when you need help? When life trips you up. When the devil knocks you flat on your face. When you're hurt and bleeding and you know deep down that can't fix this on your own.

Turn to your mighty fortress. Turn to your sword and shield. Turn to your champion. Who was knocked down and hurt and bled and died for you. That he might bring desolations upon all the forces of hell. That he might end the war between heaven and earth, and bring peace to God's people.

Because you can't fix this broken world on your own. You can't fix your sinful hearts on your own. You can't fix the curse of death on your own. But he can. Amen.