

## **Reformation Sunday / October 27, 2019**

### **Psalm 46:1**

**“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.**

**Therefore we will not fear...”**

What are your fears? What is your greatest fear at this moment? Fear feeds on itself and creates more fear. In the midst of a banking crisis fueled by fear, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt famously said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Fear begets fear and can make a bad situation worse. Nevertheless, fear can also be good. In Proverbs King Solomon said, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Do you fear God, or are you afraid of God? There is a difference! After Adam and Eve sinned by eating the forbidden fruit, they were afraid. They tried to hide themselves when they heard the sound of the Lord walking in the garden. Their sin was the source of their fear. When Isaiah was caught up into the heavenly temple and saw the Lord seated on His throne, he was filled with a holy terror. He cried out, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” God’s holiness terrified him, because of his sin.

There is a holy terror because of sin and there is holy fear born from forgiveness. In Psalm 130 the psalmist sang, “If you, O Lord should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness therefore you are feared.” Forgiveness is the source of the holy fear of gratitude. Adam and Eve felt fear because of their sin, but God forgave and promised a Redeemer. Isaiah felt the pain of his sinfulness burning under the heat of God’s holiness, but the Lord sent an angel to touch his lips and cleanse him with the atonement that Jesus would accomplish for all people through the blood of His cross. St. John wrote, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not only for our sins, but the sins of the whole world.”

We all have our fears and there are many things that make us afraid, but we never have to fear that the Lord won’t forgive us. With the Lord there is forgiveness. He gave Jesus to bear our sins on the cross. He gives Jesus to be with us in the midst of all our troubles! In all our fears, we have the confidence of knowing that God is our refuge and strength, an ever present and powerful help in all of our troubles. We may be afraid because of the weakness of our sinful nature, but in Jesus we have no reason to be afraid and nothing to fear. Because of Jesus, we can join the psalmist and say with confidence “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth give way and the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea.” God is our refuge and strength!

Today is the Sunday of the Reformation, when we remember the circumstances and events that led to the division of the Western Catholic Church and the formation of various Lutheran and Reformed denominations in the 16th century. It began with fear! Fear permeated life in late medieval Europe. This was the age of the bubonic plague, infamously known as the “Black Death.” At its peak during the 14th century, it is estimated that between 75 and 200 million people died. The bubonic plague remained a threat in the 16th century, during the life time of Martin Luther. The city of Wittenberg, where Luther served as pastor and taught in the university, was evacuated on at least one occasion, because of an outbreak of the plague.

Martin Luther wrote a book offering counsel on how a Christian lay person or priest, should minister to others during an outbreak of the plague. Death was out in the open and never far from people’s minds. Death could strike suddenly, without warning and take out whole families at one time and decimate communities in weeks. People feared death! It was fear of death that moved Martin Luther to become an Augustinian monk. Caught in a lightning storm he prayed to St. Anne and promised to enter a monastery, if she would intercede with God to spare his life.

Martin Luther prayed to St. Anne, because the only thing people in medieval Europe feared more than death, was God. People feared God, because they perceived Him as an angry judge. There was no beautiful Saviour or loving Father in the medieval church. God was not feared because of forgiveness, He was feared because of judgement! Like others who were concerned about their sins, Martin Luther entered a monastery in order to atone for his sins. He had been taught that the only way a person could have a chance at salvation and have any hope of surviving judgement, was by dedicating him or herself full time to a life of prayer, fasting and vigils. Too afraid to pray directly to Jesus, who was thought to be angry because of His suffering and death, Luther sought refuge in the saints and found solace especially in the Holy Mother of God. But no matter how fervently he prayed, no matter how long he lay awake on a cold stone floor and how little he ate, he still felt afraid of God and feared being condemned in the judgement because of his sin. He didn't fear God in the holy sense of forgiveness like the psalmist. He feared God in the terror of a sinner without a saviour awaiting the hammer blow of destruction from on high.

It's good to have a sense of our sinfulness, so that we always appreciate God's mercy in forgiveness for the sake of Christ. It is only through the awareness of our sin that we sense our need for the Saviour. When we see our sin, we can see our need for the Saviour. People who have no sense of their sin have no sense of their need for a Saviour from sin and death. Martin Luther saw his sin, but he had not been taught to see Jesus as his Saviour. On the contrary, he had been led to believe that Jesus was his judge, who at best would send him to purgatory to suffer unspeakable agony for 10,000 years to work off his sin; or at worst, would cast him into hell to suffer greater pains eternally. Martin Luther saw his sin, felt their burden and the impossible weight of trying to make them go away. He worked as hard as he could to earn forgiveness, but he didn't have any peace until he saw Jesus as his Saviour. When we see Jesus as Saviour, we see we have no reason to fear and nothing to be afraid of in the presence of God. We see that in Christ "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

But where do we see Jesus as our Saviour and how do we receive the comfort of His salvation? We see Jesus in the Scriptures and receive the comfort of salvation through faith in His name. That's where Martin Luther saw Jesus as the Saviour and how the Holy Spirit blessed him with faith in his heart. Martin Luther saw Jesus the Saviour in the scriptures, because he was blessed to study them through his teaching duties at the University of Wittenberg. It was a rare privilege to have access to the scriptures. How lightly we treat the sacred scriptures, which make us wise unto eternal life, by showing us Jesus our Saviour! We treat the scriptures lightly, because they are so accessible to us. We can take them and read them whenever we want in our own language in a hundred different translations. We can take them and read them, or we can take them and leave them. Often it's the latter rather than the former! The bible is a classic in the sense used by novelist Mark Twain. He said "a classic is a book everyone has heard of, but few have read."

St. Augustine, after whom Luther's order of monks was named, came to faith through the scriptures. Upon hearing a child's voice cry out, "take up and read," he took up the scriptures and read the verse, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to satisfy its desires." Through the law the Holy Spirit convicted him of his sin; through the gospel the Holy Spirit opened his mind to believe and his heart to receive Jesus as Saviour. Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes through the word of Christ. That's the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all who take up the scriptures and read their words of forgiveness and eternal life! We treasure the word of God because it is the source of our faith in Jesus Christ.

Most people in medieval Europe had no access to scripture in any language, let alone their own languages. Bibles were hand copied, expensive and written in Latin. Luther was blessed to read the scriptures and blessed to see Jesus the Saviour in their words. He was most blessed to discover that God was not an angry judge, but had in fact given Jesus to bear the punishment and to suffer the eternal penalty of our sins through His suffering and by His death on the cross. God is not angry. Jesus has taken away God's wrath at human sin and lifts sins condemnation from the heads of all who believe. This is the gospel message!

We remember and celebrate the gospel every Sunday in worship. Each week we receive the gospel's refreshment in the forgiveness of our sins through confession and absolution. We are nourished by the gospel of forgiveness whenever we eat Jesus' body and drink His blood in Holy Communion; given and shed for the forgiveness of our sin! It is because of the gospel of God's love that the Psalmist sang, "God is our refuge and strength, therefore we will not fear." Because of Jesus, we have nothing to fear and no reason to be afraid. God is for us, who can be against us? In Christ, God is with us in and through all things, even to life everlasting! As St. Paul said in the letter to the Romans, the gospel is the good news that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord!

Reformation Sunday is a celebration of the gospel in all its sweetness. The gospel is the good news that God offers forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all people for the sake of Jesus, who by His sinless life, kept the law in our place; and who through His sacrificial death paid the debt of our sin and satisfied the law's demand for justice. John 3:16 says it all, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him would not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him." In Jesus' God has saved the world from sin and eternal death.

Jesus is our Saviour, in whom we have forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. When we see Jesus as Saviour and receive Him in our hearts through faith, we see we have nothing to fear and no reason to be afraid! Even if the earth is moved and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, God is our refuge and strength. He is ever present in love and all powerful help in every need, especially in our need for forgiveness and eternal life! God bless our hearts with the heart of His love in the gospel of Jesus. In Jesus' Name. Amen