

Sermon Draft for October 26, 2025

Reformation Day (observed)

Text: Psalm 46

On November 10, 1483, a woman in Eisleben, Germany, gave birth to her and her husband's first child—a son. The next day that child was taken to the basement chapel of St. Peter's Church in Eisleben to be baptized. Because it was the feast day of St. Martin of Tours, these new parents, Hans and Margarethe Luther, named their firstborn child Martin—Martin Luther.

As they held this baby boy in their arms, little did Hans and Margarethe Luther realize the tremendous impact he would have, not only on the history of Germany, but also on the history of the whole world. Little did they know the role their son would play in restoring to the Church of his day the truth of God's Word and retaining that truth for believers still today.

Little did they realize that more than five hundred years later, all over the world, men, women, and children would be assembling in special worship services such as this one to say, “Thank you, God, for the birth, life, and work of Dr. Martin Luther and for the Reformation of the Church.”

There are many facets of the life of Martin Luther on which we could focus our attention during this special Reformation service. For instance, moving through his life from Eisleben to Mansfeld, from Magdeburg and finally to Wittenberg. We could well focus our attention on those events surrounding Luther’s nailing of the Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. Those Ninety-five Theses declared: You cannot earn or buy forgiveness from God. Rather, in Jesus Christ you have complete and full forgiveness. Believe it and be saved. Looking in a slightly different direction, we could focus our attention on the three basic truths that became for Luther the hallmarks of the Reformation: Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone.

But the specific emphasis on which we will focus our attention on this morning is the truth that Luther found in Psalm 46. It is that same message and truth that served as the basis for his hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

Psalm 46 was one of Luther’s favorite psalms. It is not very long, only eleven verses. Written under the inspiration of God, the psalm celebrates a miraculous victory of the children of Israel during the days when King Jehoshaphat was on the throne of David. The circumstances surrounding the psalm were this. The nomadic tribes of the Moabites, Ammonites, and Meunites were gathered together in siege against the children of Israel. To put it mildly, things looked dismal for the children of Israel. In fact, only a miracle of God could save them, and they knew it. So, Jehoshaphat turned to the Lord. God responded through his prophet Jahaziel, **“Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed, . . . for the battle is not yours but God’s”** (2 Chronicles 20:15).

The armies of Moab and Ammon and Mount Seir were filled with confusion and began to fight with one another. The battle was fierce, and the outcome was devastating. They ended up literally destroying one another. And when the morning hours arrived and the children of Israel saw what had happened, they immediately knew that this victory was not theirs, but God's. Moved by the Spirit of God, the sons of Korah, hymnists of the children of Israel, penned what we now know as Psalm 46.

Luther recognized the close parallel between what he saw in the lives of the children of Israel and what he saw in his own life and the unfolding of the Reformation. He picked up the emphasis of this psalm, and in his hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" he speaks both to himself and to his fellow believers down through the ages: don't ever forget that yours is a mighty, saving God. Yes, God is truly and always will be the believer's refuge and strength.

Whenever you think things are getting a little tough, whenever questions begin to arise in your mind as to whether God really is aware of you and your problems remember that ours is a God about whom we can say boldly: God is our refuge and strength. Yes, a mighty fortress is our God. He was then. He is today. And he will ever be such a God to the ends of time. Yes, God truly is our refuge and our strength.

It really doesn't take all that much examination of the life of Luther to see what an impact this divine spiritual truth had on him. At the beginning of his work as a pastor and professor, in the middle of the Reformation, and at the end of his life, to Luther God was again and again a mighty fortress, his refuge and strength, an ever-present help in the time of need. Repeatedly we see this in the various aspects of Luther's life. And repeatedly we see the power, the strength, and the courage that this truth, again and again, gave to him as step by step he moved from one phase of life to the next.

For instance, one cannot help but think of Luther's own personal faith life and what he says concerning it. The God Luther first had come to know and believe in was not a God who loved him and wanted to save him. If anything, he was a God who was just waiting to throw Luther into eternal damnation for all eternity. The only reason Luther wanted to become a monk was because he wanted peace with God. But even after he entered the monastery, where he tried even harder to make peace with God, the further he felt himself drifting from God. Finally, writing to a friend, Luther makes this statement: "I daily find myself approaching closer and still closer to hell." And he signed his letter "An exiled son of Adam."

But then, Luther began to study the Scriptures with greater intensity. He came across passage after passage in Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians that pointed him to the fact that he could not earn peace and forgiveness from God, but that peace and forgiveness have already been earned for us through the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Salvation is a free gift from God to all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior. As this truth more and more began to take possession of Luther's life, Luther could see in it a God who was truly his refuge and strength, first of all when it came to his own salvation.

Turning to still another segment of Luther's life, what we see and find in Luther's personal faith life we also find in his work as a reformer of the Church and in his dealings with his family. Early in the Reformation, Luther was summoned to the Diet of Worms, there to defend his faith and the truth of God's Word. Luther's friends and associates advised him not to go. They were convinced that if he went, he would be put to death. But Luther replied, "Even if there are more devils on the rooftops than clay shingles, I will still go to Worms and defend the truth of God's Word." For Luther, God was his refuge and his strength.

Regarding his family life, who can ever forget Luther the father as he sat in the upper room of their home in Wittenberg, holding in his arms his dying child, Magdalena, his little girl whom he loved so much? With tears flowing from his eyes, Luther said, “Oh, how it hurts to lose my little Maggie. But God wants her, and she is his. Therefore, I release her into the hands of a gracious and loving God.” God is our refuge and strength!

Turning to the end of Luther’s life, we find Luther going to Eisleben to mediate a dispute that had arisen between two princes. The trip was difficult and Luther was not well. But once again, he went working to the very end. We are told of the severe chest pains he had, and he knew the end was approaching. We are told of his standing at the window and praying, “The pain is so severe, God, but I am ready to come home to you, Father.” And shortly before his death, when he was asked, “Brother Martin, are you willing to die in that faith which you have proclaimed?”

Luther could say with much gusto, “Yes, yes.” A little later he fell asleep in the Lord in the hands of a God who was again showing him that he truly is his refuge and strength.

Luther had come to see that in Jesus Christ we have full and free forgiveness from God. We can see the impact that this truth had, not only on Luther, but also on the entire Reformation. To Luther, whether it was in his hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” or in his preaching, his teaching, his defense of the Gospel, his dealing with his family, his life, and his death, Luther had learned to say with the psalmist here in Psalm 46, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

And by the fantastic grace of God, that same conviction, that same dynamic truth that Luther found in these words of the Psalter, are also ours. Like Luther, we are not unaware of our sins and transgressions before God. We know that daily we sin much and deserve nothing but God’s wrath and damnation.

We also know that if God were to deal with us according to his justice, there would be but one thing that he would have to say to us: ***“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”*** (Matthew 25:41). But thanks be to God, like Luther, you and I have also come to know a God who not only sent his Son into this world to keep the Law perfectly in our stead but also went to the cross and rose victorious for your sins, my sins, and the sins of all humankind. Through faith in that saving God in Christ, we, too, have come to recognize that God truly is for us a refuge and an unending strength.

Like Luther, we also know that the day will come, maybe sooner or maybe later, but it will certainly come when we will cross the threshold of death and face our God and Creator at the conclusion of our life. Maybe it will be six months from now, maybe six years from now, maybe sixty years from now.

But thanks be to God that, like Luther, we also have come to know and believe in a Savior who has said, ***“In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also”*** (John 14:2–3). Yes, he is a God who even in the moment of death continues to be for us an unending refuge and strength. What power, what confidence, what glorious comfort it is for us, the children of God, that together with the psalmist, with Luther, and with countless believers through the ages we can declare in this Reformation service, ***“Yes, God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear. Jesus Christ is my Savior.”***

It is significant that once Luther came to know this glorious truth of God’s Holy Word and the full assurance that was his through this it, he was not about to keep it to himself.

Luther recognized that God had not revealed this divine truth to him just so he alone could be saved and feel secure. Rather, God revealed this truth to Luther in order that he might now become an instrument in the hands of God and spread this message of salvation and grace to those around him, both in Germany and all the world.

It is to that same task, that same mission, that every one of us assembled here at this Reformation service has also been called. Whether we are a man or woman, young or not so young, a blue-collar worker or a professional, God did not entrust this glorious truth to us in order that we might sit on it. Rather, he places before us both the duty and the challenge of reaching out in every direction to those who are around us, and to people all around the world, in order to share with them in an ever-expanding manner the Good News of our God and the salvation we have in his Son.

On this Reformation Day observance, thanks be to God, both now and forever, that truly ours is a God about whom the psalmist could say, ***“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea. . . . The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress”*** (Psalm 46:1–2, 7). Thanks be to God for this great assurance through his almighty, Spirit-filled Word.

Amen

Note: This sermon is a echo of the sermon “God Is Our Refuge and Strength,” by Rev. Alvin L. Barry†, which appeared in Concordia Pulpit Resources, volume 4, issue 4.