



“Spiritual Refuges”

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***November 21, 2010
Psalm 46***

You’ve heard me say this before, but I think it bears repeating: The book of Psalms was Israel’s hymnal. It was the ancient equivalent of *Billboard* magazine’s top 100 songs, except that the Old Testament book of Psalms contains 50 more songs than one would find today in an issue of *Billboard* magazine.

Within the book of Psalms, there are a handful of songs that have been transformed into the best-loved hymns of modern Western Protestants, and a select few that stand out as personal favorites among the Christians whom I have known in my life time.

Based on eight years of ministry at Eden Church, for example, I can say with confidence that there are a handful of psalms that are favorites of our members and friends. They include Psalms 23, 121, and 46, the last of which is the primary text for today’s sermon.

I have learned which psalms are favorites in our congregation largely through funeral planning. I don’t even need to pull the files from the past 60-something memorials that I’ve presided at here to tell you that one (or more) of these three psalms has been chosen by loved ones for the majority of memorials held here at Eden Church.

II

The popularity of Psalm 46 can, in part, be attributed to the Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, who paraphrased the text and set it to a new tune that he wrote called *Ein’ feste Burg*. Historians and musicologists often refer to *Ein’ feste Burg* as “The Battle Hymn of the Reformation.” Translated into English *Ein’ feste Burg* means “A Mighty Fortress.”

There are two versions of this hymn in our *New Century Hymnal*: No. 439 and No. 440. Most of you probably recognize the hymn by name, but to jog your memory, Loris will play few bars, just like on the old TV show, “Name That Tune.”

Loris...

Among church goers, *Ein' feste Burg* is the most popular hymn that Luther wrote, and it is definitely the favorite hymn of Lutherans everywhere. I remember, for example, that *Ein' feste Burg* is the theme song for “The Lutheran Hour,” a Sunday morning radio show that aired throughout my childhood. I remember getting dressed for Church School every Sunday to this tune.

Luther's best-loved hymn also inspired some of the greatest composers in the Western world to write choral, symphonic, and operatic arrangements based on this tune.¹ Some notable examples include the following: Bach, Buxtehude, Pachelbel, Mendelssohn, Wagner, and Vaughn Williams

Perhaps even more impressive than Luther's influence on Western classical music is the fact that his text has been translated into over 70 languages, and it has been set to tunes as wildly different from a 16th century German hymn as a 20th century Caribbean-style Calypso tune.²

Another fact that impresses me about Luther's hymn is that “A Mighty Fortress”—a song that was once a rallying cry of the Protestant reformers—is now a suggested hymn for Roman Catholic masses, and appears in the second edition of the *Catholic Book of Worship*, published by Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. Interestingly, this hymn's enduring popularity has breached the boundaries forged during the Protestant Reformation.³

Despite whether “A Mighty Fortress” is a favorite hymn of yours, and regardless of what you think of a traditional German hymn being abandoned for a Caribbean Calypso-style tune, you've got to respect the incredible versatility and staying power of a song like *Ein' feste Burg*.

Consider, for example, how brief a time even the most popular tunes stay at the top of the Billboard chart—maybe a year or two. And think, too, about how few are the artists who actually record even the most popular song—maybe three or four in a twenty-year period.

Now, bend your mind around the idea that Luther's version of Psalm 46 has been popular for nearly 500 years, and that Psalm 46 has been at the top of Israel's music charts for more than 2700 years!

How does one song achieve that kind of staying power within a single community, much less achieve notoriety and popularity worldwide for more than two and a half millennia?

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Mighty_Fortress_Is_Our_God

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Mighty_Fortress_Is_Our_God, e.g., Van Dyke Parks' album *Clang of a Yankee Reaper*.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Mighty_Fortress_Is_Our_God

III

Much as I respect the life and work of Martin Luther, I think that the answer to this question lies in the power of the psalm's text—not in Luther's craft—and in the way that this text resonates with human experiences throughout the ages and across cultures.

Listen again to the opening verses of Psalm 46 and see if you agree with my conclusion. In the first four verses the psalmist sings:

God is our refuge and strength,
Our ever-present help in distress.
Though the earth trembles,
And mountains slide into the sea,
We have no fear.

Waters foam and roar,
and mountains shake at their surging;
but the God of hosts is with us—
our stronghold, the God of Israel.

These are formidable words, these words of Psalm 46. They are words that were forged during and in spite of the most difficult circumstances that our ancestors faced.

Psalm 46 was part of Israel's hymnal when natural disaster struck, when droughts burned up their pastures and diseases ravaged their sheep herds, and they wondered what they would eat or drink and whether they would survive to raise another generation in the faith.

Psalm 46 was at the top of Israel's music charts when the Assyrians conquered Northern Israel in 728 BC, and then when the Babylonians crushed Judah in 587 BC, destroyed the Jerusalem Temple, and marched every survivor off to Babylon and held them in captivity for forty years.

Psalm 46 was also at the top of Martin Luther's music chart when he wrote *Ein' feste Burg* in the thick of the Protestant Reformation. It was the song that his followers sang when they challenged papal edicts, and huddled in prison cells on account of their belief in a Still-speaking God.

Moreover, "A Mighty Fortress" was written out of the depths of Luther's grief and it served as an antidote to his despair upon hearing that Leonhard Kaiser, his friend and comrade in arms, had been burned at the stake (on August 16, 1527) on account of his alliance with Luther's theology and his evangelical preaching.⁴

Knowing now a bit more about the context out of which Psalm 46 was written and passed on, and the context out of which *Ein' feste Burg* was forged, perhaps we are not so

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Mighty_Fortress_Is_Our_God

surprised that Psalm 46 remains at the top of so many people's musical charts, even in our time.

Perhaps now we better understand the meaning of Psalm 46.

Perhaps now we understand that the text of this song and the experiences of our ancestors resonate with our own struggles—struggles that may have left us feeling like spiritual refugees amidst the storms of life.

Perhaps we have come to feel through the words or music of Psalm 46 that God has been our refuge and that we have never been alone in our struggles.

Even if this psalm is new to us, perhaps now we recognize that the strength and comfort that we have felt during life's difficulties is the same strength and comfort that our ancestors in the faith learned to depend on. So we can sing with confidence these words from Psalm 46:

There is a river
whose streams give joy to the city of God,
the holy dwelling of the Most High.
God is in its midst; it stands firm.
God will aid it at the break of day.
Even if nations are in chaos, and kingdoms fall,
God's voice resounds; the earth melts away.

Yahweh is with us;
The God of Israel is our stronghold.
Come! See the deeds of the Most High,
the marvelous things God has done on earth;
all over the world, God has stopped wars—
breaking bows, splintering spears, burning the shields with fire.

Perhaps now we experience in our heart of hearts that quiet resting place where we know that God is God, that the Most High is with us, and that the God of Israel is our stronghold. Amen.