**Psalm 46** October 31, 2021

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Reformation Sunday

*1God is our refuge and strength,  
 an ever-present help in trouble.*

*2Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way  
 and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,*

*3though its waters roar and foam  
 and the mountains quake with their surging. Selah*

*4There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
 the holy place where the Most High dwells.*

*5God is within her, she will not fall;  
 God will help her at break of day.*

*6Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;  
 he lifts his voice, the earth melts.*

*7The Lord Almighty is with us;  
 the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah*

*8Come and see the works of the Lord,  
 the desolations he has brought on the earth.*

*9He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth;  
 he breaks the bow and shatters the spear,  
 he burns the shields with fire.*

*10“Be still, and know that I am God;  
 I will be exalted among the nations,  
 I will be exalted in the earth.”*

*11The Lord Almighty is with us;  
 the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah*

Dear Friends in Christ,

The theme of this meditation on Psalm 46 is

**Reformation Hope**

But why do we need to speak of hope on the day of reformation? Isn’t Reformation Day a day of confidence, of bravado and the blare of trumpets, hammers pounding pronouncements onto church doors? Why do I title a Reformation Day sermon with that meek word “Hope,” with a word that suggests things aren’t going along swimmingly?

We’ll get to the apparent mismatch of the theme of the day and the theme of the sermon in a couple minutes.

Let’s shift gears, for a moment, to something you might have heard or said somewhere along the line: “It seemed like a good idea at the time.” Like that time my dad went ice fishing toward the end of winter up in Wisconsin and the wind shifted and so did the ice while he was out there and he had to hydroplane his Ford Escort over four or five feet of open water along the shore. He made it. Not everyone in northern Wisconsin does. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.” Or that time you left your new rescue puppy at home overnight while you went to visit family. Turns out new curtains cost quite a bit more than the $25 you saved by not taking the dog to the kennel. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

It happens even with *good* ideas. Even good ideas have “unintended consequences.”

The Reformation was that sort of good idea. Read some of Martin Luther’s earliest writings about reform, like his famous *95 Theses.* You will find that when he started bringing abuses into the light of day, and suggesting that some church practices did not compare well with the clear word of God, Luther was sure that the Pope in Rome was unaware, and that he would thank him for bringing these problems to his attention. That’s not quite how it worked. The person most surprised when Martin Luther got kicked out of the Catholic Church was Martin Luther. Nailing that document to the doors seemed like a good idea at the time. As the situation unfolded some wondered.

As proof that Luther was not trying to burn down the establishment and build anew, all you need to know is that Luther did not leave the Catholic Church, but they kicked him out four years later and hung “wanted dead or alive” posters all over the empire. All you need to know is that even with Luther excommunicated, 9 more years would pass before the Lutheran party finally broke from the Catholic church, but finally, they had too. Unintended consequences they had hoped to avoid.

But wait, there’s more. By God’s grace, relative peace surrounded the Reformation through Luther’s life. However, following his death, on and off for the next century, religious wars engulfed Germany. It was an attempt to exterminate the Reformation. Loss of life was so great that parts of Germany were de-populated. Armies led by Lutheran princes and kings were defeated more often than not. Lutheran were lands forcibly returned to the former faith. Anecdotally, early in that century of war, in 1552, Luther’s widow, Katherine von Bora, fled from one of these military invasions and the accompanying plague. In her early winter flight she was thrown from an overturning wagon into a cold canal. After a couple weeks finally gave in to the injuries and disease (Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer*, 299). Now, “It seemed like a good idea” isn’t so funny. Sometimes, even when you do the right thing—right even in the eyes of God—some very bad things happen.

Reformation Day is a celebrated day. A day of joy, a day of thanksgiving for religious freedom in the best of ways. Study a little 16th and 17th century German history and the gilding begins to wear off. Maybe you are beginning to see why Psalm 46 is important for a day like today.

You see, Psalm 46 actually isn’t about the core Reformation principle even though this psalm was the inspiration for that most Lutheran of all hymns, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

Our three Scripture readings made it clear that Reformation Day is about returning to the word of God, and conforming ourselves to it. We need to continually renew this commitment through daily repentance. We need daily repentance because our sinful nature, our Old Adam, is always trying to get around and away from what God has said. It’s how human beings are. Make a law and people will line up to find ways around it. Reformation is about getting rid of self-centered religion. We must listen to what God says. But here is the problem: While you might expect reformation to bring nothing but blessings, it is quite a bit more complicated than that. It was in 1517. It is in 2021. Psalm 46 is important because of these unintended consequences.

Return to God’s Word and what He has to say about human sexuality, and people will try to penalize if not criminalize your convictions. We are a third of the way there with The Equality Act as passed by the US House of Representatives. All it needs now is a few more votes in the Senate and there is a president who has said he will sign it into law. Legal and constitutional arguments aside, if you don’t keep your head down and your convictions to yourself, there will likely be problems. Are you ready for that?

What happens when you stick with your convictions about what the Bible says? When someone in a moment of reflection says, “You know, people are basically good,” try to patiently speak what God’s word says, namely, humans are not basically good, but fallen and in desperate need of a Savior. You will get some looks!

(Disclaimer for this example: This is not autobiographical.) Suggest to your teenage kids that they shouldn’t do, in fact it is wrong, even sinful!, for them to do what literally everyone around them is doing, and that you forbid them from doing the same. You won’t have to wait long for an argument.

Suggest to a fellow Christian that we in fact, can’t have it all… that some of the things that are within our reach are things we should reconsider… Suggest that someone needs to make a choice between God and money or career or leisure or maybe even family… There are few things that will get people’s hackles up more quickly than leading them to have a reformation moment, to compare where they are with where God wants them to be.

The Reformation principle is a good idea, a really good idea. It is a godly principle. In every event and question of life, return to the word of God! But as you put it into practice, the unintended consequences pile up. Lose a friendship here, a business acquaintance there; relive day after day the argument right before they walked out the door. The Reformation principle of being guided by God’s Word is awesome while we’re here in these four walls, but out there in the real world? “Pastor, you have no idea what it would do, what it would cost.” Maybe I don’t. But Jesus did when he told his followers, *“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own… You do not belong to the world… That is why the world hates you”* (John 15:18-19).

The harsh realities of the Reformation’s unintended consequences led Martin Luther to treasure our reading, the Forty-Sixth Psalm. I couldn’t locate the original quote, but it is said that Martin Luther, when facing dark times, more than once invited a friend, “Come, let us sing the 46th Psalm.” He knew what he needed. In those dark moments, he didn’t need more rules, he needed to hear about God’s abiding presence. This psalm helped him deal with the unintended consequences of the Reformation.

When you listen to the world, you will get emotionally beat up. You will be told that Christians are supposedly living in a bygone era, believing a message that is no longer relevant, acting on principles that (if you believe the atheists out there) only lead to hatred and persecution. Declare as someone once did about his Bible based convictions, “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise,” do that and you will get labelled a wingnut, an extremist, irrational.

And the facts on the ground seem to bear this out! Look at the membership statistics of every major church body in America, and nearly all of the middle-sized ones like our own WELS, and you will find that membership is on the decline and has been for 10 or 15 years or more. That is just raw numbers. If you consider that the general population is growing while membership decreases, things look really bad. That’s the reality of it. These are not the exact same problems the Reformation originally faced, but they are similar, and for the same reason. These are the realities of returning to and remaining faithful in God’s Word in a godless society.

This is the world that Psalm 46 describes as ***“the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.”*** We see ***“the nations [in] uproar.”*** It looks like God’s people are a little flock of sheep hopelessly surrounded by beasts of prey on a cold and rainy night. It is easy to imagine ourselves the victim, the loser. That is what Satan wants you to think. He wants you despair, to throw up your hands and throw in the towel with a “Why bother.”

Let the world’s disapproving eye work on us, and we begin to release our tight grasp on the Word of God. At first in small ways, to avoid arguments, we don’t say things that God wants us to say. Then we compromise on God’s truth. Then we stop living lives that are obviously Christian because why would we want a prayer prayed out loud in a restaurant to alert people to what kind of people are at the table next to them. If we make God’s rule in our lives too obvious and we will find ourselves in a no-man’s land, abandoned by some, hated by a few, mocked by many and misunderstood by most. We don’t need those kinds of problems.

That’s what happens when we listen to the Father of Lies. But remember, he speaks lies! It’s not true!

Psalm 46 speaks God’s truth: We are not victims, but victors; we are not losers but winners. It’s a truth that we forget when we listen only to the world’s voices. Even while ***“Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall (v.6)… There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells”*** (v.4). Psalm 46 tells us the real story. It puts us in the city of God, high and exalted above the crashing waves and collapsing mountains of this world.

What is this city of God? If you know your Old Testament you might think, “Jerusalem.” But there is no river in Jerusalem. This is not a this-world geographical reality. This is another city. It is the same city of God pictured in the final book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, a city with the River of Life flowing through it. This is the New Jerusalem, what we call heaven. ***“God is within [this city,] she will not fall… The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”*** This is the message that Satan desperately does not want you to hear. Satan wants us to believe that we are the losers, on the wrong side of history, and all that. God’s Word tells us the opposite. Heaven is ours. The battle has been won, not by us, but by Jesus Christ who endured the shame and scorn of the cross and the pain of our sin’s punishment. His victory has been handed to us. We are the victors. So God reminds us in verse 10, ***“ ‘Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.’ The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”*** Amen.