

Therefore We Will Not Fear  
Psalm 46  
October 26, 2014  
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Today is Reformation Sunday. We have sung great hymns of the Reformation, and we have read and heard Psalm 46, which proclaims the truth: God is our refuge and strength. Therefore –

Therefore. A word that is proclamatory, declamatory, establishing. Because this is true, because what I have stated is true, THEREFORE.

God IS our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in time of trouble. THEREFORE WE WILL NOT FEAR.

Good words for people involved in REFORMATION, because REFORMATION is a risky endeavor. Martin Luther, the great reformer – Martin Luther heard in this psalm words of comfort. Luther knew danger. People actively sought to take his life, because he was threatening not only a system of belief, but an economic system.

When he suggested that paying to get out of purgatory, the system called indulgences, whose purchase was a dynamic driver for the Vatican economy – when Luther suggested this was not what God willed, and worse still, it wouldn't work – people in power were not pleased.

Luther's REFORMATION of the church involved, as a matter of course, the threatening of a belief system, and a way of life, and the foundation of churchly economics. So he was in danger much of his life – physical, real and present danger. This danger visited him because he, through his actions, made people, people in power, afraid. He threatened their livelihood. He told truth that might impact their bottom line. And this made them afraid.

People who are afraid, who fear, often respond with violence. Leaders of the church threatened Luther, and sought his life. In response, Luther turned to the scriptures, and he found in Psalm 46's THEREFORE a place of comfort, a truth on which he could depend.

Luther is remembered to have started each day with washing his face and saying, "I am baptized", loud. This meant – there is nothing that is going to happen this day that will be able to take this away from me. The central reality of my life is inalienable to me. The body they may kill, but I am baptized – THEREFORE I WILL NOT FEAR.

God continues to call the church to REFORMATION. Luther was joined by later reformers of many nationalities and ideas, some of whom are pictured on the bulletin today. And God continues to call the church, even to our time.

32 years ago, a pastor in Luther's tradition was called to the work of REFORMATION. This pastor, Christian Fuhrer, served the Nicolaikirche – St. Nicholas Church – in downtown Leipzig, a city in East Germany. Leipzig holds an important place in Lutheran history. Luther took part in an important Reformation era debate there, and Bach was the Director of Music at the church

Christian Fuhrer would later pastor. Many of the sites identified with Luther are in the former East Germany, behind the Berlin Wall.

In 1982, Pastor Christian Fuhrer called upon his people to be about REFORMATION. In the midst of staggering oppression, governmental spies and military who could make you disappear, who could hurt your family if you stepped out of line or made trouble – in a context of a lack of basic human rights, and real poverty, all of which had paralyzed people with FEAR for decades – in 1982 Pastor Fuhrer called upon his people to have regular Sunday church, and then to have Monday church – to come to church on Monday nights to pray for peace. On Monday evenings, he called people to candlelight vigil services of prayer for peace.

The services at Monday Church started small, but over the years they grew, to the point that they spilled out of the church and onto the streets. Think of hundreds, and then thousands, and then tens of thousands of people quietly holding candles, praying, singing, calling for peace.

Of course, for peace to come, the wall would have to fall. Of course, for peace to come, the country would have to be reunited. Of course, for peace to come to Germany, all of Europe would feel the impact of the stress on the Iron Curtain.

Pastor Fuhrer held Monday Church services every Monday from 1982, to October of 1989. Seven years of weekly prayers for peace. Seven years of weekly candlelight vigils aimed at REFORMATION. Seven years of claiming the truth of THEREFORE, we will not fear. And their quiet, nonviolent, resistant actions caused fear to grow in the hearts of those in power. So much fear that in September 1989, with Monday Church growing into what became known as the Monday Demonstrations, tens of thousands of people met every Monday, calling for peace.

The government, alarmed at the growing groundswell of support for Fuhrer's reforming and transforming ideas, called for the demonstrations to stop. They put up roadblocks, and stationed thousands of troops in riot gear, and stated that the demonstrations must end by October.

On October 9, nearly 100,000 East Germans crowded the streets of the city, chanting, No Violence, and, We Are the People. In their way, they were chanting THEREFORE. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble, THEREFORE WE WILL NOT FEAR. You cannot scare us, because we are together and we know the truth. You cannot stop us, because though you threaten us, we have something you cannot take away. We know that peace is our right and we know that God calls us to peace. The body you may kill, but God's truth will abide still. We are united, and we will not fear.

The government stood down, and on November 9, 1989, the wall crumbled.

Throughout the demonstrations, for seven years, Pastor Fuhrer was called in for questioning many times. The government asked, Do you think your candles and your prayers will do anything? Look at what we have – guns, tanks, tear gas, bombs, and the support of the Soviet Union. And what do you have?

And no doubt, within the church, some asked, Is this worth it? Can we succeed? Isn't this too political for us? Isn't this too risky?

And Pastor Fuhrer and the people of Nicolaikirche, sustained by the truth on which they stood, maintained their vigils, and their candles, and their prayers. And they with God's help, called by God to work toward REFORMATION, overcame their oppression.

They, with the God who makes wars cease and breaks the bow and shatters the spear and burns the shields – they, with God, were sustained.

It's an inspiring story that we need to hear, friends, for we live in fearful times as well. There are no tanks at the gates, but we are battered by the demons of fear. We live among a fearful people, and the work of REFORMATION is always hard, always risky, always running counter to what feels normal, what seems to fit our comfort zone.

Have you heard about Ebola? Do you know that Ebola is in the US? Do you believe that you are at risk of catching Ebola?

Scientists say that in the US our risk – the risk to individuals – is vanishingly small. Fewer people will contract Ebola in the US this year than will be struck by lightning. So say the scientists.

Nevertheless, as the parent of a college student, I received email this week from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, proudly remembered as the first Polytechnic Institute in the nation. It's a science geek school, where everyone speaks the language of calculus, and physics, and the higher arts of engineering, with ease.

The good folks of the administration of RPI felt the need to write to all parents, many of whom had been in touch, inspired by fear – fear that their children were at risk while at school – at risk of contracting the deadly virus. So the RPI Ebola protocol was the subject of the email that went out to all parents this week, in response to the fear that moved parents to be in touch with the school.

The irony of parents of freaky science smart children, writing with fear about this virus, which the scientific community is clear remains a very very small threat, should not be lost on us.

Evidently, to date, RPI parents have not yet in sufficient numbers contacted the school to express their concerns so that the lightning risk abatement protocol would be shared with us all, although it's risk factor is in fact more pressing.

This story could be funny, except for the fact that those few health care workers who have been infected have received many death threats. People in neighboring apartments have gone to their landlords and asked that those who have been infected be evicted.

Oh yes – let's render those who are already sick with a deadly disease homeless. Because who would rent to them now?

Ebola – which is making people fear – is resulting in some people becoming prone to violence and threats.

That's what fear does to us, friends. When we are gripped by fear, we cannot think straight – but we do have the capacity to turn our fear on others in the form of hate, in the form of violence, in the form of insult and verbal savagery, in forms of suspicion and rumor and parking lot conversation, and the taking and assigning of sides.

In Luther's time, conflict in the church led to fear and confusion for many. In East Germany, Pastor Fuhrer's actions seemed foolhardy to some. In times that call for REFORMATION, fear can stop us from seeing straight – from seeing God, from hearing God's leading in troubled times.

Fear forces us to ask which side people are on, and it entices us to pick a sides.

Fear is the result, ultimately, of a lack of belief in God and God's power to heal. Fear says, maybe God will not act. Fear says, God is not a reliable refuge and strength.

Those who would be about the work of REFORMATION find that they must face their fears, and the fears of others, and speak the truth they know.

Facing those who aimed to take his life, because of what he was preaching, Luther said, "I am on the side of the Gospel – THEREFORE, Here I stand, I can do no other. Therefore, I will not fear."

Facing oppression, and spies, and suspicion, and deadly force, Pastor Fuhrer in East Germany said, "We are on the side of peace – THEREFORE, let us have Sunday Church inside, then Monday Church in the street. In the face of guns and tanks and oppression and violence, let us hold candles, and hands, and sing hymns, and call for peace, and an end to war."

So, friends, what now? What work of REFORMATION is God calling us to now?

This congregation experienced the destruction by fire of the first building. But the leaders of that time did not let the devastation of that moment seduce them into fearing the future or render them paralyzed. They moved forward, knowing that God was their refuge. Believing there was still work to do, still Good News to share and people who needed to hear it, they took up the work of REFORMATION, finding a new site, building anew, and launching new ministries in this place. Through our history, leaders of this congregation persevered and stood strong and continued to proclaim God's grace in this place, asking, in each new era, what REFORMATION God willed in this place from this congregation.

As Presbyterians, we are called to be "Reformed and always Reforming". So, as the psalmist notes that God is our refuge, no matter if the earth should change, we can proclaim that God is our refuge and strength, no matter what changes come to the church, no matter what pastors come, no matter even if a woman pastor comes, no matter what decisions are made, no matter what the future holds, and no matter to what REFORMATION God calls us –

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help. Therefore, we will not fear.

Our God is a God of REFORMATION. Therefore, we can face the future with confidence and hope, knowing that change is on the horizon, and that God will be in that future with us.

Friends, God is calling us today, as God called Martin Luther, as God called Christian Fuhrer and the people of Nicolaikirche. God is calling still.

Friends, the world needs a witness to a way of life open to God's call and not driven by fear. The world needs this. Can we demonstrate in visible and tangible ways faith in the God of REFORMATION, who is our refuge, to a world that defaults to fear? Can we remind ourselves as we rise and as we work and as we rest? Can we remind each other?

Friends, the world needs us. The world needs a confident people, a confident church, believing congregations, ready to answer God's call to REFORMATION, full of faithful people who know that

God is our refuge and strength – and because that because is true, can say,  
therefore we will not fear.

May it be so for us, here in this place, now in this moment, as we answer God's new call to REFORMATION.