Sermon on Psalm 46

Reformation Sunday 2020- Maricopa Lutheran Church

The Gospel according to St. John the 8th Chapter,

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

31Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 32and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” 33They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?”
  34Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. 36So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

The Gospel of the Lord,

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

Let’s pray: Speak, Lord, your people are listening.

Psalm 46 inspired Martin Luther to write the words of the hymn “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” the first verse of which we sang moments ago. The Psalm has become a personal favorite of mine.

In the first stanza, the Psalmist contrasts the constant presence of and security in God despite the turmoil of creation –the earth shaking and the sea roaring- mountains trembling – images that creation itself is in rebellion against its Creator.

The second stanza intensifies both the threat and the promise focusing on the identity of God’s chosen people and the nations that threaten them over the course of Israel’s existence. The emphasis here is on human rebellion against the Creator and human sin against others. Of this stanza, Old Testament professor at Luther Seminary Rolf Jacobson says, “Yes, all of creation is fallen and in rebellion, but human sin and rebellion is more nefarious, or at least more potent -- if only because the combination of human intelligence and human will make evils such as genocide and war possible.”

Again, the words of Rolf Jacobson, “The psalm's final stanza culminates with a statement of trust that is cloaked as an invitation and then with a promise. The invitation is the imperative cry, "Come!" behold the works of the Lord.” Then we read “He makes wars cease to the end of the earth, he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, he burns the shield with fire.”

In verse 10, The Psalm commands us to “Be Still and Know that I am God.”

Those are the words that spoke to me when I attended my first silent retreat at Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas a little over four years ago. Like this year, it was an election year and the political polemics and what seemed to be a world-wide infection of hate-speech contributed to my need to escape for a while from all the “noise” of the world to a place of peace in which to seek a sense of spiritual peace. My hope was that I could sustain that peace despite living in a world where the earth shakes, the mountains tremble and the seas roar, where war is waged, disease kills and people hate and harm one another.

During those five days, I hung on to these words, “Be still and know that I am God” and they became and remain the rock on which I lean when I read the latest headlines in the news or hear of natural disasters and storms. I began that retreat meditating on the whole of those words. Each day I shortened the meditation to fewer and fewer words, so my five days looked like this:

Be Still and know that I am God

Be still and know that I am

Be still and know

Be still – and finally

Be

It was a wonderful way to quiet my thoughts and concerns and simply rest in God’s presence and listen for God in the silence.

As I prepared this sermon, I first paid a great deal of attention to the first two stanzas about the presence of God in the midst of the rebellion of creation and the rebellion of humankind against God. The third stanza however, is the one that ultimately stood out. “Behold the works of the Lord. “He makes wars cease to the end of the earth, he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; He burns the shield with fire.” What a powerful promise!

You see, it is one thing to grasp the notion that in the midst all of the sinful rebellion in the world, God is a constant and faithful presence in us and with us – that God never leaves us – never abandons us to the evils surrounding us. But to hear and trust in the promise of the end of wars and death and disease and disasters is difficult. Nevertheless, it is the promise given to us.

Though the Psalmist seems to describe God’s presence and power in actual war, Luther’s words seem to indicate more of a spiritual battle. He wrote: “Though hordes of devils fill the land all threatening to devour us, we tremble not, unmoved we stand, they cannot overpower us.” Luther created a word for that spiritual battle - the word anfechtung - the middle of the word – fecht – meaning “fight”. For Luther, this anfechtung – this fight - described the devil’s attacks on his faith. When I consider Luther’s point of view, I wonder if for us too, the battle is less the reality of wars and destruction and hate in the world, but more a spiritual attack that causes us to doubt God’s presence in the midst of those things.

 I suspect I am not the only one who sometimes wonders, “Where is God in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic?” Or “Where is God as fires consume our land and hurricanes flood it?” The answer to that question is crystal clear. God is present in all disaster and suffering so that we are never left to deal with it alone. I get it, I know the answer, but truth be told, I want more. I want God to keep us safe from all evil and disease and disaster. It is what I pray for. But that is not at all what either the Psalm or the hymn promise.

The promise is that the final victory without question will be God’s, but that doesn’t mean we will experience no hardships, no battles, no sickness, no death, no sorrow… Luther voices that in the last verse of the hymn. “God’s Word forever shall abide, no thanks to foes, who fear it; for God himself fights by our side with weapons of the Spirit. Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child, or spouse, though life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day. The kingdom’s ours forever.”

What you and I must do when we experience fear and doubt, sickness and sorrow is to Be Still– and know – trust and remember that God is God and we never walk alone. No matter what deep and dark valleys we may have to go through this week or next week or this year or next year, we will not fear because the ultimate victory will belong to God. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” Amen.