

Reformation 2020

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

October 24-25, 2020

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

On Reformation Sunday 2012 we prayed Psalm 46 as Superstorm Sandy barreled toward us. We'd been hearing increasingly dire predictions about the "Frankenstorm" racing north and we were bracing for a big hit as the choir sang:

¹God is our refuge and strength,

a very present help in trouble.

²Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved,

and though the mountains shake in the depths of the sea;

³though its waters rage and foam,

and though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

The imagery was spot on. Our fear was named. Our faith was claimed. By God's grace we endured.

Sandy's flood waters swept us out of this sanctuary and into the surrounding neighborhood. The Furniture Bank and Kitchen & Linen Brigades were born then and thrive still. Now it's not storm surge that keeps our worker bees busy: it's more like fire, illness, joblessness, homelessness, poverty. The beauty and the power of this outreach reminds us that the refuge and strength God offers is often routed through God's people. Fears are dispelled when someone, anyone cares. When the caring someone happens to be from a church, we can only hope that those on the receiving end realize God is answering their prayer through other human beings.

It's been quite a hurricane season, but not one that's treated us so badly here in NJ. 8 years after Sandy we have a smorgasbord of other fears to contend with: pandemic, elections, social unrest, global warming. All the more reason we should revisit Psalm 46 and pray it with increased vigor!

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Psalm 46 was Martin Luther's inspiration and jumping off point as he composed "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." When he was in the monastery, Brother Martin was beset by **many** fears. Chief

among them was his fear that he would end up in hell. He knew he could never be good enough: even as a monk he couldn't pray fervently enough, he couldn't fast long enough, he couldn't confess his sins heartily enough, to be worthy of Heaven. And he was **right**. None of us will ever be good enough to earn our own salvation. None of us will ever be moral enough to merit eternal life. He found himself standing outside a locked door, shivering in the cold of what he believed was God's intense disapproval. The key he found to unlock that door, the correct password that enabled him to step into the warmth and light of God's love and forgiveness was the passage from Paul's letter to the Romans that we always hear on Reformation weekend. It includes the harsh but necessary truth that we've **all** failed in love of God and neighbor, and we **all** stand in need of God's mercy. Paul basically says, "Don't kid yourselves that you're better than the next guy.... *For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...*" (Romans 3:22b-23)

The bad news is we're sinners and the good news is we have a Savior! I can't make myself right with God, but Jesus has already done that for me. His death on the cross has paid the price of my redemption. A few weeks ago we talked about Francis of Assisi, how he was captured in battle, became a POW and had to be ransomed in order to go home again. We've all been captive to sin but God has ransomed us from sin, death and the devil through Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. God has done the work. We just need to embrace the Gift.

Not to be confused with what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." **Not** to say that our ransom from sin, our redemption from evil is a gift we give passing acknowledgement to and continue on our way unchanged. No. Paul reminds us, "*You have been bought with a price.*" (1 Corinthians 6:20) And he shares his status-quo-shattering change of self-identity:

... it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

I am in awe that the Son of God loves **me** and gave himself for **me**. I hope **you're** in awe that the Son of God loves **you** and gave himself for **you**. If we even begin to scratch the surface of that Gift Given

on the cross, gratitude overflows our hearts and we can't help but love God in return. So any ways in which we show our love of God and love of neighbor **aren't** attempts to woo God into saving us. They are natural gestures of gratitude that God has already saved us; they are signs of reciprocity in love.

Some people think "the problem with the world" is that people no longer have an awareness of sin. I think that in many cases the problem is that we don't trust God to forgive the sins of which we're very much aware. But if God isn't willing to forgive, there was no point to Christ's death on the cross – and we would never say that! In the first passage from Jeremiah (31:34c) the Lord says:

I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

In the epistle from Romans (3:25c) Paul teaches:

...in his divine forbearance [God] had passed over the sins previously committed...

And in the Gospel Jesus Savior says:

"... if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:36)

"Therefore we will not fear...." The Superstorm of our sin is calmed by the One who died that we might live. No spiritual tumult, no pandemic, no politics, no civil unrest will unravel our faith in God who *"is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."* If we're finding it hard to hold onto that peace that passes understanding that is the Holy Spirit's gift, let's make our mantra another beautiful verse from Psalm 46:

Be still... and know that I am God.

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham