

“Where is your God now?!” Psalm 46.

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore, we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;

God will help her when morning dawns.

The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.

The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;

he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire.

“Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations,

I will be exalted in the earth!”

The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Blessed Reformation Day! Re-formation... But what does that mean?

As one of my professors Dr Reinhard Slenczka used to say: “You can best understand it from its opposite.” What is the opposite? De-formation. Something has been deformed and now it needs to be restored to its previous goodness.

What are we talking about? What has been deformed and needs to be restored to its goodness? We read today from John 8: **“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”**

I think it is fair to say that when we hear about the need to reform, we mostly think about restoring the truth and purity of God’s message. To restore the teaching of the Gospel so that it is as clear and sound as possible. Amen to that.

But is that all? Is that all that we need to reform? If we stay with that alone, that is quite a dangerous place to be. How so you may wonder? Do you remember who were the most zealous adversaries of Jesus? Watching Him constantly, examining His orthodoxy on every step, challenging Him when He departed from what they held to be important, plotting to kill Jesus, when He openly challenged them? Who?

Yes, Pharisees. But who were Pharisees? They were those concerned about how to remain faithful to God Yahweh, how to keep all His instructions and also all those instructions which were introduced to help to keep God's instructions. All of them!

We are called to be faithful to our Lord. But it is a fine line between being faithful to our gracious Lord Jesus and being faithful to human traditions introduced to help us to remain faithful to the Lord.

We are called to guard the faith entrusted to us. But it is a fine line between guarding the faith entrusted to us and becoming self-righteous and feeling morally superior, looking down at those who don't believe or behave according to our lofty standards, or even condemning them and driving them out of our midst.

Reformation... What shall we reform? It is essentially about the 1st Commandment. About putting the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit at the center of our lives. Expecting from Him everything good and running to Him in all our distress.

About allowing Him to shape every aspect of our being. Allowing Him to reveal the truth about Himself, about us and about this world. Allowing Him to define our identity - who we are, as created in His image and likeness, as redeemed by Jesus and adopted as children of God the Father.

Allowing our Triune God in His wisdom to instruct us for every calling in our lives, as children, as spouses, as parents, as employees and employers, as members of His Church, as citizens in our country and so on.

That is what it means to abide in Jesus' words. Is that what we do? Do we conform our lives to the good and wise design of our gracious Lord? If not, then we need to be reformed, we need to be restored.

As Luther puts it in the Small Catechism: "The Old Adam in us should by daily repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and a new man should emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

Psalms 46 which we heard today, speaks about yet another aspect of our lives where we need to be reformed and restored. Can you guess what it is? Listen again: **"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."**

Therefore, we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling."

What situation is the psalmist describing? Trouble, yes, trouble. Our situation. All those countless situations when we are in trouble, whatever kind of trouble that may be. And what do we long for, what do we need in those situations?

Security and hope. And this is yet another aspect of our lives where we need to be continually reformed. Who or what is our refuge and strength? Is it our God? Is it? Really? Or perhaps it is something more tangible? Our familiar structures in life, our

support networks, our savings, our wealth, our connections, our wisdom. And on the one hand, it is understandable that we may feel much more secure and hopeful if we have all those resources in place. We know they work; we know they can help us in our time of trouble, they can provide some real solutions.

What about God? Is He so ready to help? Do you agree with these words? God is **“a very present help in trouble.”** Is that your experience, that He is very present help in your trouble? Sometimes yes, but sometimes... it may feel that He is very absent in our trouble. **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** (Ps 22:1)

Psalms 46 continues and this is how God guides us: **“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.”**

What picture is this? **“There is a river, whose streams make glad the city of God.”** What does this remind you of? There was a river in that garden. A long time ago. There will be **“the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city.”**

These words bring us both back to Eden and also forward to the New Creation where our God will dwell among us. The city of God. For the psalmist it was Jerusalem. There the Most High had promised His presence in the temple.

That was back then, now things have changed. God's presence is not anymore restricted by a place. He is with us, He dwells among us not in a place, but as a person. As the Word who became flesh, as our Risen Lord Jesus Christ.

He is not in the midst of the city; He is in the midst of His people. That is where He is present help in trouble, inviting us, gathering us, blessing us with His life-giving and comforting Word and nourishing us with His Holy Meal.

That is comforting to know that we can find our God in His Church, to help us in our trouble. But, in our situation this may not be enough. Because this is exactly our problem. Our church. For decades we have felt secure in our church, the LCA.

Everything was seemingly good, but under the surface, hidden from ordinary eyes, things began to change. Gradually. Step by step. Like in that proverbial story with a frog and a boiling kettle. Heating up slowly, until the struggle for survival was over.

On top of that, it may seem that this congregation has reached crossroads. Not enough people to fill the positions in Church Council. Not enough to carry out all the duties. Not enough to keep our doors open. What is coming? Where will we find our God who is a very present help in trouble in the midst of His people?

Remember the scary warning from Amos: **“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord God, “when I will send a famine on the land— not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.”** (Amos 8:11)

Have these days arrived for us? What do you think?

Can we find security and hope in our Lutheran church? Can we find it in our congregation? Or, perhaps, the time has come to be reformed and to seek our security with the only One who can grant it to us and to place our hope in our God.

To have our God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ where He belongs, in the very centre of our lives. Ask Him to comfort us, to remind us of His wonderful promises. There is no promise that the LCA will endure forever, or that our congregation will remain forever. Nope! Not at all!

Instead, the Lord says this to you: **“The gates of hell shall not prevail against my Church.”** (Matt 16:18) **“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”** (Heb 13:5) **“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”** (John 10:27-28) **“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”** (Matt 28:20)

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” (1 John 3:1-2)

“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)

Our God never stops caring for us. He is so stubborn. He keeps calling us, teaching us, even today we have three young people confirming their faith and receiving the Holy Supper for the first time. There are brothers and sisters who serve to prepare a church home with a rich meal of God’s Word and Sacraments for those who may have come to crossroads either in the LCA or in their own congregations.

The Lord is at work for you. **“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. “Be still, and know that I am God.” The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”**

“Mighty fortress” is probably Luther’s most famous hymn. It was inspired by this very Psalm 46. When we sing it, we may think that this hymn was written in the midst of the battle for the pure teaching of the Gospel, fighting for the truth.

In reality, it was written in the midst of great trouble, as a deadly plague was ravaging Wittenberg, many fleeing the town, many dying, many losing their loved ones in their arms. This hymn was written to comfort those who are in trouble, and to help us to place again our security and hope, where it belongs. In our God.

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” He is, indeed. Amen.