

The Festival of the Reformation – Pr. Faugstad exordium & sermon
Ephesians 6:10-17: “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”
October 29, 2023 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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EXORDIUM

Flung to the heedless winds
Or on the waters cast,
The martyrs’ ashes, watched,
Shall gathered be at last.
And from that scattered dust,
Around us and abroad,
Shall spring a plenteous seed
Of witnesses for God. (*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* #556, v. 1)

These words were inspired by Martin Luther’s first hymn, a commemoration of the deaths of two monks named Henry and John. These monks were arrested for their “evangelical” preaching, which meant they proclaimed salvation through Jesus alone and not through a person’s own efforts or works. After eight months of imprisonment and interrogation, they were put on trial.

At the trial, they were told to bow to the authority of the pope and the church fathers. They said they would as long as their writings did not contradict the Holy Scriptures. They were told that it was sinful to read Luther’s writings, since the pope had banned them. They replied that it was wrong to ban writings that faithfully teach the Word of God. When it became clear that the two men would not repent of what they were teaching, they were sentenced to death by fire.

They were led quickly to the place of their execution. A yellow tunic was put on Henry to mock him and a black gown on John to symbolize his sinfulness. They were tied to the stake. They waited for half an hour as their executioners tried to get the fire going. Then as the flames advanced, the two men said the Creed, and they sang Psalms and hymns. Their last song was an old Christian hymn, the *Te Deum Laudamus*, which means, “We praise You, O God.” Finally they cried out, “Lord, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us!” And then they were overwhelmed by the smoke and after a while were reduced to ashes.

The monks Henry and John were the first martyrs of the Lutheran Reformation. They died on July 1, 1523—five hundred years and a few months ago. They did not go to the stake because they believed in the man Martin Luther. They learned from Luther’s writings to put their trust in Jesus. They died confessing Jesus as their Savior and Lord, even when the whole world seemed opposed to them.

Their example is an encouragement to us, encouragement to resist the temptations of the devil and the appeal of going along with the crowd, and encouragement to firmly believe and clearly confess God’s truth with honest hearts. We pray that our Lord equips us as He did these two faithful men, so that we also are kept in the saving faith until our earthly end.

We join in the prayer of hymn #18, the fourth stanza, "Triune God, Be Thou Our Stay":

Triune God, be Thou our Stay;
O let us perish never!
Cleanse us from our sins, we pray,
And grant us life forever.
Keep us from the evil one;
Uphold our faith most holy;
Grant us to trust Thee solely
With humble hearts and lowly.
Let us put God's armor on,
With all true Christians running
Our heavenly race and shunning
The devil's wiles and cunning.
Amen, amen! This be done;
So sing we, Alleluia! (ELH, #18, v. 4)

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The sermon text for today is taken from the sixth chapter of St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. / Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, the great Conqueror who willingly joined Himself with us losers and single-handedly destroyed our terrible enemies, dear fellow redeemed:

If you had to go to the front lines of a battle, what would you want to have with you? What would you need in order to feel safe, or at least to feel like you had a fighting chance? Maybe it would be body armor like a bullet-proof vest and a helmet that could protect you from shrapnel and bullets. Maybe it would be a thick wall in front of you or well-trained soldiers on either side of you. Perhaps what would make you feel safest is a powerful weapon in your hands that causes your enemy to duck for cover.

The apostle Paul talks about a battle situation like this, except that the battle he refers to is a spiritual one. It happens around us and inside us, and we can't see the enemy. But we can see

the enemy's work; we can see his "*schemes*." Paul writes that our conflict is not primarily "*against flesh and blood*"; our greatest enemies are not other human beings. Rather our conflict is against the rulers, authorities, cosmic powers of darkness, and forces of evil in the spiritual realm.

Paul is describing a hierarchy of wickedness with the devil at the top and his fellow demons sowing destruction and chaos around him. They are the ones who tempt and incite human beings to do the bad things they do. If we do not recognize that the devil and demons are behind the evil in the world, we might think that every human problem can be solved by a human solution. But there is no human solution that can overcome the devil.

This is what the Roman Church was attempting to do at the time of the Reformation. The people were taught that they could make satisfaction for their sins by the good works they did, by the prayers and gifts they offered, or even by purchasing a piece of paper, an indulgence authorized by the pope. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses*, which argued that a soul could be saved only through repentance and not through the purchase of indulgences.

As he continued to study the Scriptures, Luther came further in his understanding of salvation. He realized that only God could supply the righteousness that His holy law required, and that this righteousness was fulfilled by His only-begotten Son in the flesh, Jesus the Christ. A sinner could have his sins forgiven and be justified before God not because of anything he did, but because of God's grace toward him and the faith worked in his heart by the Holy Spirit to receive these gifts.

When Paul writes about putting on "*the whole armor of God*," this is what he is talking about. He is talking about putting our trust in God alone as we face the devil's attacks. What is the armor we wear? "*The belt of truth*"—that doesn't mean our own personal truth, what is true for each one of us. It is God's truth, the truth about our sinful weakness and about His gracious plan to save us. "*The breastplate of righteousness*" is Jesus' righteousness. A breastplate protects a soldier's vital organs, and so it is Jesus' perfect life that covers and protects us, so that we are kept alive and well in Him.

The "*shoes for [our] feet*" is the readiness to stand firm in the Gospel of peace, to conquer by the message of grace which has conquered our own hearts. Paul tells us what "*the shield of faith*" is for. It is to "*extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one*." Whenever the devil tries to accuse us for our sins, we point in faith to Jesus, who already paid the penalty for all our sins. "[T]he *helmet of salvation*" is what protects our minds from the devil's schemes as he tries to work doubts in our heads or anger toward others or sinful desires for what God has not given us.

Finally, we have "*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*." We do not advance in this battle by physical force. We speak God's powerful Word, and the devil and the demons have to retreat. They cannot stand against the power of God's Word. Whenever Jesus comes through the Word, the devil's head starts hurting, since Jesus stomped on it and crushed his power by dying in our place and rising from the dead for our victory.

But if we want to give the devil the advantage over us, we can set aside the armor of God and try to face him on our own. We do this whenever we feel pride for the great things we have accomplished, and fail to give God the glory. We do this when we embrace what God says is sinful, instead of repenting of sin and running away from it. We give the devil the upper hand when we don't speak up when the truth is challenged, when we compare our good works with those of others, when we trust our own reason or strength, when we stop regularly hearing and learning the Word of our God.

The devil will defeat us if we are not wearing the armor of God. He has done it before. He schemed against us, and his schemes were successful. We lost ground in our faith, and perhaps at certain points, we lost our faith altogether. But even though the devil has won many battles against us, he has not won the victory. This is clear by the attention you are giving to God's Word right now. You know that you are weak. You know that you have sinned. And you also know that Jesus saved you from your sin and death and still fights for you against "our ancient foe" (ELH #251, v. 1).

That is what Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" is about, a hymn that is called "The Battle Hymn of the Reformation." Based on the Forty-Sixth Psalm, it describes God as a Fortress of strength, a Shield of protection, and a Weapon of defense. We need His help because of our powerful enemy who wants to destroy us, whose strength has no equal on earth (v. 1). On our own we would lose, but One stronger than the devil fights for us, the Man of God's choosing. This is God's Son come from heaven to earth, the Lord of hosts, who is victorious in every field of battle (v. 2).

Even a world full of devils cannot defeat us when Jesus fights for us. They are overthrown by a Word, the Word of God (v. 3). Their arms go limp when God speaks His Word. They have to run and hide, because they know they are beaten. As long as our Lord is with us in the fight "with His good gifts and Spirit," with His power imparted to us through His Word and Sacraments, we remain in the kingdom of God, and His kingdom remains ours (v. 4).

This is what it means to "*be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.*" This is what it means to "*take up the whole armor of God*" and "*to stand firm.*" It means repenting of our weak efforts on the battlefield that could not win the victory, and it means trusting in Jesus' righteousness and blood for our salvation.

We are not lost. We are not forsaken. We are not destined for eternal damnation—because God the Father loves us, His Son redeemed us, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies and keeps us in the true faith. **A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.** We give Him thanks that the Gospel was proclaimed and bore fruit at the time of the Reformation, and that His saving Word is still proclaimed among us today, despite our unworthiness to receive it.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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