

Message for October 25, 2020

Psalm 46

Sunday March the 15th: it almost seems like a lifetime ago now. During the previous weeks there had been growing concern over the spread of the new virus that had first emerged in China earlier in the year. The concern grew as we witnessed what was happening in Europe and especially in Italy and Spain but even so, most of us did not appreciate either the seriousness of what was happening or its implications.

The concern grew substantially in the week leading up to the 15th and yet, with the exception of using hand sanitizers, life went on as usual; indeed our premier even encouraged people who planned on going south for the March Break to go ahead and have a good time. There was a pot-luck dinner and euchre night scheduled for the Friday evening at Boston and, after some debate, it went ahead as planned but then? On the Saturday afternoon the alarm bells so-to-speak started ringing. I got a flurry of emails that afternoon that all shared a common theme; are you having a worship service the next morning? If so, what precautions should be taken?

It was a bright, beautiful late winter morning and the service was held at Boston though with a lower attendance than usual. Upon my arrival at Omagh it was very quickly decided that we would not go ahead with the worship service that morning and I remember chatting with some people outside, admiring the deer in the field across the road from the church. Looking back I think that we realized that there might not be any worship services for the next little while but in all honesty, none of us were prepared for what was coming. Indeed I would have been flabbergasted if someone had told me that morning that we would not come together again for worship until the end of October or, in the case of Boston, mid-November. Likewise I would have been absolutely shocked if anyone had told me what things would be like when we finally gathered again; pews roped off to restrict the seating, no singing or verbal responses and of course the wearing of masks. So many things are now so different both in the church

and the world beyond; in the words of a popular song from years ago, “You don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone”.

While it wasn’t planned, in a way this Sunday is a good one for a church’s re-opening; it is because today, the last Sunday in October, has long been observed by us Presbyterians as Reformation Sunday. The theme of today’s service is traditionally that of remembering and honouring those who have gone before us in the faith; their faith and commitment. With this in mind, we have for years begun that service with that great hymn of the Reformation, Martin Luther’s “A mighty fortress is our God”.

In my Thanksgiving message two weeks ago I made reference to one of the greatest hymns of thanksgiving of all time, “Now thank we all our God”. In my message that morning I noted that that hymn was written during the Thirty Years War, a three decades long struggle between the Protestants and Roman Catholics in Europe for supremacy. That time however was not just scarred by physical violence, it was also marred by famine and disease; in fact it is estimated that between 4.5 and 8 million people lost their lives. Despite all of the suffering though Martin Rinckart, who wrote the words of “Now thank we all our God”, believed that there was still so much to be grateful for. Like this hymn, “A mighty fortress is our God” was also written during the same time period but while Rinckart emphasized gratitude, Martin Luther emphasized something else altogether. Inspired by the words of the 46th Psalm he urged everyone to have faith and put their trust in God no matter how grim things seem to be. Think of the opening words of that hymn:

“A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our Helper He amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing:”

Yes, life can be and in fact sometimes is both hard and dangerous but even so, we are not alone. God, our bulwark never failing, is with us and this of course is one of the great promises of the Christian faith. We can think of the words of the beloved 23rd Psalm for example and, as I

wrote in one of my messages months ago, it can be comforting to simply recite it to ourselves when we are feeling overwhelmed. There are also the famous words of Paul taken from his letter to the Romans.

“I have become absolutely convinced that neither life nor death, neither a messenger of heaven nor a monarch of earth, neither what happens today nor what may happen tomorrow, neither a power from on high nor a power from below, nor anything else in God’s whole creation has any power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Almighty God, the one who created us, redeems us and loves us is also the one who is always with us. This is something that we need to remember, especially perhaps at this time when we are caught up in the dreaded second wave of the current pandemic. But of course it is not just enough to remember this; something else is required on our part and that is faith. It is not enough just to **know** that God is with us, we need to **believe** this. And it is this faith that sets us free to live our lives without either dread or fear. Yes, we still worry and fret about what may or may not happen, we are only human after all but even so, we should not let our fear overwhelm us or paralyse us. In Luther’s words:

“Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill:
God’s truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.”

Of course it is a lot easier to sing these words than actually believe them and live them. This is certainly more challenging for many people today than what it was before the present pandemic started but even so, this is what we are called to do; to put our faith, hope and trust in God no matter what. A pastor down in Florida named Larry Brincefield once told this story which may well speak to us today.

It was an adult Bible study group and the participants were asked which scripture passage gave them the most encouragement when they felt tired, discouraged and overwhelmed.

One young man quoted the well-known 23 Psalm. Another quoted from today's Psalm: 'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble'. Some of the students quoted other passages but then an 80 year old man said that his was 'and it came to pass'. In fact he said, that phrase occurs a total of 396 times in the Bible. The class greeted his words with amusement and he was asked to explain.

At age 30, he said, I lost my job and had six hungry mouths to feed. At 40 my oldest boy was killed overseas in the war. At 50 my house was burned to the ground and nothing was saved. At 60 my wife of 40 years got cancer. At 65 she died. I still miss her today. The agony I went through in each of these situations was unbelievable. I wondered; where was God? But each time I looked in the Bible and saw one of those 396 verses that said 'And it came to pass', I felt that God was telling me that my pain and circumstances were going to pass and that God would get me through it.

This is a wonderful example of faith; this man's absolute conviction that God was with him and would get him through. The loving sustaining presence of God: the old man in the story knew it, Martin Luther knew it and the psalmist who composed today's psalm knew it. A mighty fortress **is** our God, a bulwark never failing or, to quote from the scripture passage that inspired this hymn:

“God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in times of trouble.
Therefore we will not fear.
The Lord of Hosts is with us,
The God of Jacob is our refuge.”