A Mighty Fortress is our God!

A mighty fortress is our God, A trusty shield and weapon;
   He helps us free from ev'ry need That has us now o'ertaken.
   The old evil foe Now means deadly woe;

Deep guile and great might Are his dread arms in fight; On earth is not his equal.

These words come to mind for many people when they think of the Festival of the Reformation.

The Reformation of the church began on 31 October 1517. On this day, Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk, nailed 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. His theses questioned some teachings in the church that seemed contrary to the Word of God. They invited scholars to debate. They were not intended for the common people to read, question, and follow. But it didn’t take long for the truth of God’s Word to capture people’s hearts.

This hymn of Martin Luther became the battle hymn for the church of the Reformation. But too often, that leads us to think of this hymn and its message only in terms of theological disputes, distant battles, or historical remembrances. Instead, these words should remind us we are still in the middle of a battle. The Old Evil Foe we face is Satan. He means us “deadly woe”. He employs his “deep guile and great might” against us. He is seeking our death and eternal destruction in hell. His strength is greater than any we can muster. He has honed his cunning with thousands of years of practice to exploit every weakness of our human nature. Truly we must confess “On earth is not his equal.” We fall deeper in his net of temptation. We cannot stand against him, yet we find “a mighty fortress, a trusty shield and weapon”. Our God has promised to be our help in time of need. He has promised to take up our cause. He has promised to protect us. He has promised to save us.

The Psalmist uses the picture of a fortress, a stronghold, a castle to picture our God. In the middle of this struggle, we always have a safe place to find refuge. He is truly an ever-present help in times of trouble. In other words, whenever trouble is near, whenever Satan’s forces rise up against us, our God is always with us. He is the fortress in which we can always find shelter.

That is exactly the picture Luther points for us in this hymn: A Mighty Fortress is Our God! We will use this hymn as the framework of our meditation today. We will explore what that means: A Mighty Fortress is our God! That brings us to stanza two:

With might of ours can naught be done; Soon were our loss effected.
   But for us fights the valiant one Whom God himself elected.
      You ask, “Who is this?” Jesus Christ it is,

The almighty Lord. And there’s no other God; He holds the field forever.

As Luther says in the hymn, we must confess we are helpless in this struggle. With might of ours can naught be done; Soon were our loss effected. It never works to stand alone against the Old Evil Foe. We can learn a lesson from Adam and Eve. What happened when they tried to stand alone in the fight? They failed, and we are still struggling under the results! Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned,” Paul tells us. Now we carry this sin. Now we are subject to death, sin’s terrible wage. How can we expect to avoid sin by ourselves when every inclination of our natural self is toward evil? How can we stand spotless before God when we are covered in the grime and gore of this sin-filled battle? Our loss would come all too quickly in this world and the next!

But we don’t have to stand alone. From our mighty fortress a valiant hero comes forth! He comes to fight by our side; he comes to fight in our place. But for us fights the valiant one Whom God himself elected. You ask, ‘Who is this?’ Jesus Christ it is, The almighty Lord.

When Jesus was just a baby, Satan tried to devour him with Herod’s sword. In the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus did battle alone with Satan for us. He stood firm in the face of every temptation. Throughout his ministry, Jesus drove out demon after demon from people. He battled for us with his perfect obedience. He never failed to trust his Father. He never abused his power for selfish
reasons. He never misplaced his trust or misapplied God's Word. And above all, he never missed a step in the mission he came to complete.

Every day of his life Jesus fought for us. He is the Almighty Lord who became one of us. Our perfect Savior never wavered in his obedience to his Father. The outcome of his struggle was never in doubt. Truly, "He holds the field forever!" So what does that mean for us?

Though devils all the world should fill, All eager to devour us,

We tremble not, we fear no ill; They shall not overpower us.

This world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will,

He can harm us none. He's judged; the deed is done! One little word can fell him.

When he was summoned to the city of Worms to testify about his teaching before the Emperor with his very life at stake, Luther said, "I want to go even if there be as many devils there as tiles on the roof." Can we express the same confidence: those devils shall not harm us none; they shall not overpower us? But didn't we just say we can stand against Satan? How can we face him now without fear? Luther reminds us, "He's judged; the deed is done! One little word can fell him."

How can this be? When did this happen? The Psalmist doesn't say. Luther doesn't tell us in the hymn either, but you know when it happened. The devil takes another run at Jesus. His efforts against Jesus reached their peak in Gethsemane, before the Sanhedrin and Pilate, and finally atop Golgotha. On that tree, Satan figured to devour us by devouring our Champion. Jesus died; the grave swallowed him. How could he overpower the devil in death?

It seemed like Satan won that day. But Luther still says, "One little word can fell him." Before Jesus bowed his head and gave up his spirit, he cried out in a loud voice, "It is finished!" Three words in English, yet only one in Greek: "Tetelestai." As God's plan of salvation was fulfilled, the devil's plans came crashing down around his head. Jesus' death was the price for our life. Jesus' blood washes us clean of sin, sets us free from the devil's power, and secures our home in heaven. So the deed was done. So was Satan's judgment accomplished. So was Jesus' victory complete, and ours with it. So tremble not and fear no ill because the devil cannot overpower us when we stand at Jesus' side.

The Word they still shall let remain, Nor any thanks have for it;

He's by our side upon the plain With his good gifts and Spirit.

And do what they will -- Hate, steal, hurt, or kill --

Though all may be gone, Our victory is won; The kingdom's ours forever!

The Word they still shall let remain. God promises: no matter what the devil does, God's Word will always remain for people. In his Word, we find truth. In his Word, we find the very power of God.

Peter quotes Isaiah in his first epistle, "All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever." The Word of the Lord endures forever is really what the Reformation is all about. When Luther took his stand before the Emperor, he said, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God!"

That has been Luther's legacy ever since. What determines what I believe? The Word of God! What determines how I should live, what right and wrong? The Word! What must be the only authority for a church? The Word! How do I know my sins are forgiven and heaven really belongs to me? The Word! How important it is for us to immerse ourselves in hearing, reading, studying, and singing God's Word!

In God's Word, we find our Savior and the assurance: "The kingdom's ours forever!"

But understand this: the devil will not give up! He will continue to fight against us. He may still hate, steal, hurt, or kill, or even "take our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife." He is fighting to tear us away from Jesus. He is battling to bring us into hell. He will use anything he can to do this!

Yet on the basis of Jesus' promise in the Word, we can say, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Or if you prefer, you could confidently sing with Luther, "And do what they will -- Hate, steal, hurt, or kill -- Though all may be gone, Our victory is won; The kingdom's ours forever! Amen.