

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

What are you afraid of? I mean, what terrifies you?

We all have our demons. And when we struggle with them, sometimes it seems as if we're all alone in the world, as if God is gone and he's not coming back.

Do you ever wonder what it was like with ML? When he stood alone, at Worms, in 1521. When they asked him, "Do you repudiate everything you've said, everything you've written? Your whole life's work?" What were his fears like then?

Of course it must have been intimidating to stand before all the princes and Bishops and powers of the proud Holy Roman Empire. They literally held his life in their hands. For them to kill Martin Luther would have been no great chore. Death is a fearsome thing to us all.

But death at the hand of the executioner was not Luther's greatest fear. He had once known a terror far greater. He even gives it a name. He calls it "an evil conscience." He says about it, "Your whole life hangs in doubt and uncertainty, full of anguish and terrors...there is no orderly thinking or planning left, but only a search for some place to hide, a place which is never found. Nothing," he said, "Nothing is more miserable than uncertainty."

You see when his guilty conscience troubled him, he was stuck in that place where he didn't know how things stood between him and God. He wasn't sure that God loved him. If you know God loves you, then everything else will fall into place. But if you don't know that, then you can be sure of nothing. Then, as the Bible says, even the sound of a rustling leaf will set you running.

The question is, what changed him? How did he conquer his fears? How did he arrive at a certainty of how things stood between himself and his Creator? What power made it possible for him to stand there and to look the Emperor and princes and bishops in the eye, and—even though he knew they might kill him—say, "Unless I am convinced by Scripture or clear reasons...I cannot and will not take back anything."

The answer to that question, my friends, is really the central truth of the Reformation. That central truth is summed up no better than in Psalm 46 the psalm that inspired Luther to write, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." In it Luther found a song in celebration to the promise that gave him hope and courage even during his own darkest hour:

God is With Us--We Will Not Fear!

The psalm sets before us a stark contrast. Two completely different pictures side by side. One is dark and fearful. The other is bright and peaceful. On the one hand, there are these raging waters, more out of control than any storm surge or tsunami. There are these huge earthquakes shattering mountains and causing them to tumble into the heart

of the sea. The whole universe seems to be at the point of collapse, just like it will be on judgment day.

Not only is nature shaking like a leaf, but all the nations are in an uproar. It's as if the psalmist can hear the strident clamor of billions of voices, all raised in rage and hate. The blast of bombs and the roar of war. The kingdoms and nations of this world clashing against each other, destroying each other.

Against this terrifying background, as if in the eye of the hurricane, surrounded by the horrors of war and the terrors of natural disasters, the psalmist portrays the city of God:

*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. (Ps 46:4-5).*

Raging seas, a flowing river. One brings death. The other brings life. Warring nations, tottering kingdoms. And a city at peace. Nothing can shake her. She will not fall. God is within her. Though some danger may come in the night, she has no reason to fear. God will help her at break of day. And there will be joy in the morning.

And listen to the way the people speak in the city. They don't howl in anger. They don't moan in terror. They say, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." They say, "We will not fear though the earth give way." Even if heaven and earth should pass away we have something more solid, more sure, more certain than the universe itself. They say, "The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."

Ah, but that's just it, isn't it. How can I know that God is with me? How can I know that this promise is meant for me? How can the people of this city be so sure? What leads them to sing this song with such supreme confidence? Many cities lie in ruins now that once thought they were completely safe. Many kingdoms have crumbled to nothing that once believed God was on their side.

Only one way, only one way we can know as Luther learned. Not by our own doing and striving. Not by our own glorious deeds and mighty works and brilliant successes. In fact, this message is not for the proud, for those who are full of themselves. It's not for the religiously proud like the Pharisee who says, "Lord, I thank you that I am not others: look at what I have done." To them God has no words of comfort to speak. They don't go home justified.

And this message of comfort is not meant for the worldly proud, either, for those who have no time for God, who fight against the Church, who believe that might makes right and who measure a person's life in terms of money, power, and influence. To them God has something to say, but it is not a comforting message. The Psalmist says, "God lifts his voice and the earth melts...Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." (Ps 46:6, 10).

And haven't we seen the power of God's judgment at work in our times, too? Our own nation was hooked on getting and spending like there was no tomorrow. Piling up debts and never mind about the future. Well with all the stock market's wild gyrations, we've learned that on the other side of the great bloated mountain of exuberant greed lies the bottomless pit of fear, of sheer financial panic. See what desolations God has brought on the earth. He breaks apart the hedge fund and shatters the mortgaged back security—all the paper gods in which people put their confidence.

No, this message is not for the proud but for the poor in spirit, the broken hearted, those who are overwhelmed by fear and guilt and anxiety and crushed by the weight of their own sin. It's meant for people who know they have nowhere else to go. It's meant for those who are frightened because they live in a world gone so wrong, where sin seems to have taken over, and where the devil begrudges us every minute of our lives.

Consider this psalm as God's way of speaking tenderly to the fearful and the brokenhearted. To you and to me. It's as if he was dealing with us, face to face, and saying to us through this psalm, "I am with you! And when I say that, don't you see that I'm making you a promise. I am not with you as a rock or a stone, but as an ever present help in trouble. A mighty fortress. A strong shelter from the storms of life. A warm refuge from the chill of death. I know what you will say, 'How can I be sure? When I myself am so weak, so needy, so sinful, and so unable to help myself?' But I'm telling you, It's not about you or what you are or what you have done. It's about me and what I have done for you.

"See! I have given you my Son. He is called Immanuel. He is an infallible sign to you that in him, I am with you forever. How much closer could I have come to you than to draw near to you in my Son, take on flesh and blood, and become your brother? Do your sins weigh you down? Lay them on him! He has carried them all already in his body on the tree. "

"Look at him there suspended between earth and sky. He knows the ache of loneliness. He knows what it's like to have the whole world turned against him. Abandoned by all. Mocked by the powerful. Seemingly helpless to help himself. Yet it's only the power of his love that holds him there, and his mighty resolve to carry out my purpose. By his dying and rising again your sin is cancelled, your death is destroyed, and the Devil has been forced to surrender. There is no reason to fear come what may. Jesus is with you. He's by your side forever. Because of Jesus, there is no distance between us. And never ever will be."

I know this is God's Word and the truth of Scripture. I know that it's the truth that gave Luther his courage, too. I only wish I could believe this with my whole heart, don't you? But the truth is, we struggle sometimes. That's what I find so real, and so down to earth about Luther. Yes he wrote about God's power and faith. But he also wrote about the struggles faith goes through. Sometimes it seems as if God is hidden behind the clouds of doubt, fear, and worry. Luther wasn't afraid to talk about that. We shouldn't be either.

We look at the church and it seems so fractured, so troubled. People don't seem to care about truth anymore. Believers seem so few and so weak. Our enemies seem so many and so powerful.

Or we look at ourselves. Oh on sunny days it's not so hard, perhaps, to believe God is our friend. But in the time of trouble, when God puts the marks of suffering and cross on us, then all we seem to feel is the fear and loneliness. God is gone and he's not coming back.

That's exactly why God puts these two pictures in front of us. Raging seas, tottering mountains, melting earth. And a city at rest.

Here's what God is telling us with these two pictures. He's saying, "I know how things seem. I know how it looks to you sometimes. There's the world as you see it. And there's the world as I see it. There's the world where everything is falling apart. And there's the world where everything's right and at rest."

"Here's what you must do: shut your eyes to the chaos. Close your ears to the clamor. Don't even listen to the anxious cries of your own fearful heart. Listen to my Word because my Word remakes the world. My word is truer than anything you see, than anything you feel. Heaven and earth will pass away. But my Word shall not pass away."

See the city. That's your city. That's where you live by faith even now. I'm there, too, right in her midst. Right there with you. That city won't be moved. That's where all the believers are, safe and sound forever. I hold them in my love. And no one can snatch them from my hand. No one can snatch you from my hand. When trouble comes, forget the world. Hold fast to the Word."

Dear God, your Word and your Word alone is true. You promise to be with us. You gave us your heart when you gave us Jesus. That's why, that's why, we will not fear.

Amen