

Be Still: Within Our Power Nothing Is Accomplished

Reformation Sunday + Psalm 46 + The Rev. Rob Shearer + Home Harbour and Cowan Heights United Church + October 24 and 25, 2026

Pray with me, if you will:

Jesus Christ, be our refuge and our strength in these troubled days. Hold us as we lean on your everlasting arms and seek your ever-present help. And may the words...

A person much smarter than me¹ once noted that, within the various 'branches' of the Christian faith, the main symbol that each major group adopts is the opposite to the part of the Jesus story that they emphasize.

Now hear me out here: For evangelical protestants, the main emphasis from the Jesus-story is on the crucifixion and the redemptive power of Jesus' death on the cross - and yet, strangely, the main symbol for that part of the Christian family, is the empty cross.

For Roman Catholics, the emphasis tends to be on the power of Jesus' resurrection. And yet the main symbol that you'll see in most Roman Catholic churches high there up above the altar, is the crucifix – Jesus still on the cross.

For the Orthodox, the emphasis tends to be on the incarnation – God becoming flesh in Jesus at Bethlehem. And yet one key symbols of the eastern, or Orthodox Church is the cosmos, as reflected in their starred, domed structures.

Think about that for a second. How often is it that when we lean into one part of the Jesus story, the parts we focus on less tend to get echoed in other ways. I kinda like how the Holy Spirit does that for us, right? *[pause]*

Which is why I think it's so cool that we get Psalm 46 chosen as one of the readings every year for Reformation Sunday. Now, in some ways, that makes sense - it is, after all, the Psalm that the 16th century reformer Martin Luther uses as the basis for his famous hymn *A Mighty Fortress is our God*.

And yet, if you ask me, at the same time, Psalm 46 is a subversive choice in the way it challenges some of the reformation's deepest cultural shadows.

Hold onto that thought – 'cause we'll get there in just a bit. *[pause]*

Yes, it is reformation Sunday, when we celebrate the day when some 509 years ago – on or around October 31, 1517 - when, at least in legend, Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic monk, priest and professor, nailed his famous *95 Theses* to the church door at Wittenburg.

The nailing, by the way, is most likely a later dramatic addition. If anything, Luther *glued* these statements up on that door (nails were expensive those days), or even to many church doors – a common practice in those days when an academic wanted to share a topic to debate – although Luther's own memoirs only note that he mailed his now-famous statements to the local bishop.

¹ Adapted from Brian McLaren

But historical nit-picking aside, Luther had serious complaints about the way his own Catholic tradition was doing things. Among them – and the *95 Theses* were primarily protesting this – was the notion that you can *pay* to get yourself or others out of purgatory. For those who don't know, purgatory is, in the Catholic tradition, a holding place to have sin purged before you get to go to, well, “the good place”

It's important to note that Luther's biggest concern was that folks were starting to think they no longer needed to repent of things they'd done wrong – they could just do terrible things and then pay for a so-called indulgence as a ‘get out of jail free’ card. As a priest, this troubled Luther, to say the least.

Now, before we get too triumphal about it all, I do want us to be careful to avoid over-glorifying the reformation. Yes, my fellow protestors, the reformation, is a mixed bag.

First, there's the question of unity. Prior to the reformation, there were dissenters and groups who challenged the church from within – many of them with deeply valid concerns, and some of whom were even martyred. And, in the diversity, there was still a lot of unity: there were really only two church bodies prior to the reformation – the churches of the east and west; commonly known as Orthodox and Roman Catholic.

Today, there are over 47,000 Christian sects and at least 12 major ‘groupings’ of Protestant churches – some of them, well, pretty weird and problematic. “By schisms torn asunder, by heresies distressed as we sang in our processional hymn “– which, by the way, was also the inaugural hymn of our United Church of Canada.

And even as we remember his witness today, as a church committed to anti-racism, it's important to also note that, Luther, himself, was a horrific antisemite, whose words most likely contributed to some of the horrors that followed in later centuries.

And then – and this is where the lectionary choice of Psalm 46 helps us out today – there's the little problem of the protestant work ethic – a notion that hard work is central to Christian spirituality. This ‘work ethic’ is probably the root of modern capitalism, at least if some modern sociologists are to be believed. It's here that I think our Psalm, a deeply Jewish text – thank you very much Martin Luther – speaks into the shadows of what emerged from the reformation.

This emphasis on hard work, discipline and diligence that flowed from Protestantism is, of course, ironic – given that one of the main things that Luther and the reformers (again) rightly challenged was what my mama might call a ‘works based righteousness’; the notion that we get redemption or salvation by our own work or our own merits.

You see, in spite of the culture that came out of the reformation, the reformers really wanted to recover or re-emphasize something that was at the core of what it means to be a Jesus-follower. That is, grace.

SO, with that, let's look a bit deeper at the Psalm for today. After all, another of the reformer's gifts to us was a renewed emphasis on the importance of scripture.

The Psalm opens with a reassurance of God's presence – a present help in trouble amidst this scene of natural tumult; the mountains are shaking, the earth is changing - and waters are roaring.

And then, right in that tumultuous intensity is a moment of peace, again, marked by the very presence of the Creator – described in terms of a river with gentle streams, a heavenly city not moved by all the tumult... The very “Lord of Hosts” the God of angels is with that city, and it all empires are shaken and melt by God's very word.

And at the end of each stanza - where we sang Luther's hymn tune as a response in the Voices United rendering, is this little word “selah”; a word which divides scholars as to its meaning. If they include it at all, most versions of scripture don't even try to translate it and leave it as it is. Sometimes, selah is thought to be rendered from two Hebrew words: s_lah, “to praise”; and s_lal, “to lift up.” Others believe it comes from a similar Hebrew word; Salah – that is, “to pause.”

It's amazing to me that after 2 millennia of translation and interpretation, embedded in our sacred text is this little reminder to slow down, to praise and, yes, to experience the grace.

Friends, we live, too, live in an age which echoes the tumult and disorder captured in the language of that ancient psalm. Climate chaos, wars, the threat of AI, empires crumbling, the rising cost of living, the division between the rich and poor, the rise of tyrants and fascists, polarization, demonization of the other; of immigrants, people of colour, of queer folk, trans folk, to name a few.

We, too, live in a time where we each need, in that reforming spirit, to be called back by our sacred texts, to faith, to Christ's redeeming work, to God's providence and presence, to God's abiding help... and, yes, to grace.

Grace. It's there in that famous line in the psalm: *Be still and know that I am God*. That, friends, is a call to disarmament. A call to surrender. A call to realize that, in spite of our tendencies, you or I, no matter how hard we work, aren't the ones who are going to save the world - or even save ourselves.

It speaks as a contrast that great shadow of the reformation and its work ethic. It speaks a stillness into our misled belief that we are the ones that need to do the work of redemption or justice or to build the reign of God, rather than those works of mercy and justice we do, instead, flowing as a response to God's grace in our lives.

Be still. For God disarms our need to be the saviour. You don't need to strive. You don't need to control. Jesus did that work in the cross and resurrection, and we live in joyful response with love; with justice, peace, joy and, yes, with praise. This is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ!

A literal translation of verse 2 in Luther's famous hymn goes like this:

“With our power nothing is accomplished. We very soon are lost.
The right One whom God has chosen strives for us.
Who is this, you ask? Jesus Christ, The Lord of hosts,

And there is no other God.”²

Within our power, nothing is accomplished.

For me, that’s the greatest gift the reformation gave us – to return us to grace instead of fixing things by own power. Jesus does this work for us. Freeing us, then, from guilt - to live joyful lives of deep spirituality, bold discipleship and daring justice. *[pause]*

So, friends, on this reformation Sunday, let’s not forget that the church is ‘reformed *and* always being reformed’ according to the Word of God, as one historical figure notes.

Kind of like how the symbol of one part of the Christian tradition offers a corrective to its own focus. Or how a Psalm speaks to what we miss, even when we celebrate the reformation. In the same way, through the course of Christian history, the Holy Spirit corrects us when we get off track.

It’s happened all through history – in the 4th century when the Roman Empire corrupted the Jesus movement, the desert mothers and fathers and the early monastics moved into the deserts and provided an alternative. The Franciscans, with their emphasis on peace and dialogue came in the middle of the bloody crusades. The Mennonites, radical reformers, came later in the reformation, rebutting the earlier reformers emphasis on violence and war and the state as a means of change. And then came the counter-reformation and Ignatian spirituality, which addressed more of the reformer’s grievances.

Fast forward - and it happened in the call to unity when Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists – and others to follow - formed The United Church of Canada over 100 years ago.

Reformed and always reforming.

Fellow Jesus-followers here in this time and place - what is the call for us to repentance and reformation today?

On this reformation Sunday let us hear sacred scripture, hold fast in faith, repent - and live into the grace that is ours. Let us praise and ascribe all Glory to God.

I declare to you this morning: This God, the God of our forebears is still our refuge and our strength. A very present help.

And, our response to this wonder? Be still. You are enough. You’ve done enough. For by grace we are redeemed.

Yes, let us respond in praise, gratitude - and in to be sent out from here in love.

Amen.

² Adapted from <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-mighty-fortress-is-our-god>