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Homiletics: Sermon Study on Psalm 46 for Reformation

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HOMILETICS

SERVICE THEMES AND TEXTS FOR OCTOBER

| | | | |
|-------------|--------------|----------------|---|
| Oct. 7 | 20 S. a. Tr. | Prov. 2:1-8 | God Gives Ability for Service |
| Oct. 14 | 21 S. a. Tr. | 2 Sam. 7:17-29 | Because of God in Christ Our Life Grows |
| Oct. 21 | 22 S. a. Tr. | Prov. 24:14-20 | Forgiveness Begets Forgiveness |
| Oct. 28 | 23 S. a. Tr. | Ps. 85:8-13 | The Battle of Flesh and Spirit |
| Reformation | | Psalm 46 | God Our Sole Help |

Sermon Study on Psalm 46 for Reformation

Most commentators assume that this Psalm presupposes a special, extraordinary deliverance of Jerusalem, e. g., the destruction of Sennacherib's army (A, Pe, Sc)* or a severe earthquake (B). But no specific deliverance is mentioned in the Psalm (Po). "Uebrigens versteht es sich von selbst, dasz der Inhalt des Psalmes . . . kein blosz alttestamentlicher ist. Es gibt nur eine Gemeinde Gottes durch alle Jahrtausende und dieser gehoert er an" (H). Luther had a special liking for this Psalm. "Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott" is based on it. Often, when things looked rather desperate, Luther told his friends: "Come, let us sing the 46th Psalm." It has also much comfort for us in our troubled times.

"Ps. 46 was composed as a *shir*, exceeding artistic in structure" (B). The main theme: "The Church Is Safe Under Divine Protection." This theme is amplified in three strophes, which are closed by *Selabs*. The thought of the main theme is repeated and emphasized in two refrains at the end of the second and third strophes. Thus the close of the Psalm is linked up with the beginning, completing an artistic circle (A, H). Some claim that there was also a refrain after the first strophe which was lost by negligence of copyists (B). According to the reconstruction of B, each strophe "has three couplets; the second line of each, starting

* For key to abbreviations see Bibliography.

from the synonymous idea, amplifies and intensifies it in stairlike advance."

"To the Chief Musician. For (or by) the Sons of Korah. Upon Alamoth. A song." Some scholars believe that this Psalm was written for, others hold that it was written by, the Sons of Korah. The Hebrew original permits both translations. Spurgeon is very emphatic about his conviction. He writes: "We cannot agree with those who think that the Sons of Korah were the authors of these Psalms (whose title contains their names); they have all the indications of David's authorship that one could expect to see. Our ear has grown accustomed to the ring of David's compositions, and we are morally certain that we hear it in this Psalm. Every expert would detect here the autography of the Son of Jesse, or we are greatly mistaken. The Sons of Korah sang these psalms, but we believe they did not write them. Fit singers were they whose origin reminded them of sin, whose existence was a proof of sovereign grace, and whose name has a close connection with the name of Calvary."

Al alamoth — "Nicht mit Sicherheit zu erklären" (G). *Alamoth* means virgins or young women and may be used here as a technical term of Hebrew music, to denote soprano voices or instruments with a high sound (A, Ge).

1. "God (is) for us a Refuge and Strength; a Help in distresses found (or proved) exceedingly (or abundantly)." "Refuge"—a hiding place, where men seek shelter and security from impending danger. "Strength" may mean a stronghold or source of strength. "In distresses, straits, *in Drangsalen*"—the plural may refer to various occasions, or to complex, aggravated troubles. "Found," i. e., by us, in our experience. "Very, exceedingly, abundantly," may qualify the whole clause, as one eminently and emphatically true (A). *God* is our Refuge and Strength in contrast to the whole world (Sc). "God is our Refuge and Strength, not our armies and fortresses. . . . Forget not the personal word 'our,' make sure of your portion in God. . . . All other refuges are lies, all other strength is weakness. . . . He never withdraws Himself from the afflicted, more present than friend or relative can be, more nearly present than trouble itself." (Sp.)

2. "Therefore we will not fear in the changing of the earth and in the moving (tottering) of mountains in (or into) the heart (midst) of the sea (lit., seas)." 3. (Although) its waters roar and foam, mountains tremble in its swelling (or insolence). Selah." The strong figures express the most violent changes and commotions. The earth may change its place or condition, mighty upheavals may take place. The mountains may be symbols of mighty kingdoms, the sea may typify the world, continually agitated by the strife of human passions, cf. Is. 57:20. "Foam," lit., ferment, effervesce. "Swelling" is also used figuratively of pride, very appropriate to the commotions of the world, caused by the pride of man (A). "Hier ist . . . das Meer Symbol der Welt, der Voelker-masse ueberhaupt, die durch ihr Prinzip, den Hochmut, die Selbstsucht, in bestaendiger Unruhe erhalten wird" (H). "Those that with a holy reverence fear God need not with any amazement be afraid of the power of hell or earth. If God be for us, who can be against us, to do us any harm? It is our duty, our privilege, to be thus fearless; it is an evidence of a clear conscience, of an honest heart, and of a lively faith in God, his providence and promise. . . . 'We will not fear, though the earth be removed,' though all our creature confidences fail us and sink us, though that which should support us threaten to swallow us up, as the earth did Korah. . . . Yet while we keep close to God, and have Him for us, we will not fear, for we have no cause to fear. . . . Though kingdoms and states be in confusion, embroiled in wars, tossed with tumults, and their governments in continual revolution, though their powers combine against the church and the people of God, aim at no less than their ruin, and go very near to gain their point, yet will not we fear, knowing that all these troubles will end well for the church. Ps. 93:4. If the earth be removed, those have reason to fear who have laid up their treasures on the earth, and set their heart upon it; but not those who have laid up for themselves treasures in heaven, and who expect to be most happy when the earth and all the works that are therein shall be burnt up. Let those be troubled at the troubling of the waters who build their confidence on such floating foundation, but not those who are led to the Rock that is higher than they and find firm footing upon that Rock." (M. Henry.) "How fond the psalmist is of 'therefores'!

His poetry is no poetic rapture without reason, it is as logical as a mathematical demonstration. The next words are a necessary inference from these. 'Will not we fear.' With God on our side, how irrational would fear be! Where He is, all power is and all love, why therefore should we quail? . . . Alps and Andes may tremble, but faith rests on a firmer basis, and is not moved by swelling seas. Evil may ferment, wrath may boil, and pride may foam, but the brave heart of holy confidence trembles not. Great men who are like mountains may quake for fear in times of great calamity, but the man who trusts in God needs never be dismayed." (Sp.) "Ist Gott unsere Zuflucht . . . was bekümmern wir uns denn, wo wir endlich bleiben wollen? . . . Wo der Schoepfer bleibt, da bleibt auch sein Gemaecht." (Luther in E.) *Selah*—"Musikalisches Kunstwort. . . Die Bedeutung und Etymologie des Wortes ist ganz dunkel" (Ge). Many assume that it indicates a pause or a place of emphasis.

4. "(There is) a river—its channels gladden the city of God, the sanctuary of the dwellings of the Highest." B claims that *nabar*, "stream, river," originally was at the end of v. 3 and had the meaning of "ocean current." Then he translates v. 4: "His (God's) brooks make glad," etc. He blames an ancient copyist for this error of dividing the verses, destroying thereby the measure of both verses, and changing their thought. We base our remarks on the present Hebrew text.

In contrast with the turbulent and threatening sea, the Psalmist now mentions a peaceful and abundant river. This symbol of God's grace, which is frequent in Scripture, seems to allude to the river of Eden, Gen. 2:10; cf. Ps. 36:8-9; Ezek. 47:1-12; Joel 3:18; Zech. 14:8; Rev. 22:1-2. "The city of God" is the Church, of which Jerusalem was a type. "The sanctuary" may stand as an apposition to the city of God or may be a specific reference to the Temple. The plural "channels" may indicate the variety and fullness of divine favor (A). "Divine grace, like a smoothly flowing, fertilizing, full, and never-failing river, yields refreshment and consolation to believers. This is the river of the water of life, of which the church above as well as the church below partakes evermore. It is no boisterous ocean, but a placid stream; it is not stayed in its course

by earthquakes or crumbling mountains, it follows its serene course without disturbance. Happy are they who know from their own experience that there is such a river of God!" (Sp.) "Dieser Strom der Gnade Gottes in Christo mit seinen sanft daherfließenden Fluessen und Baechlein und mit seinen lieblich murmelnden Quellen und Bruennlein erfreut die Stadt Gottes. . . . Denn das Evangelium, in welchem diese Gewaesser kommen, ist eine frohe Botschaft." (Z.)

5. "God (is) in the midst of her, she shall not be moved (made to totter). God will help her at the turning of the morning," i.e., after the night of distress the morning of deliverance will dawn (Sc). Some see here a specific reference to the night in which Sennacherib's host was smitten and the sight which was disclosed at the break of day, cf. Is. 37:36; Ps. 30:5 (A). "Quoties nox miseriarum praecessit, toties subsequitur laeta auxilii aurora" (Geier in Po). "Die Not ist nur wie eine vergehende Nacht, die Angst nur wie ein boeser Traum. Bald kommt die Hilfe Gottes, bald das trostesfrohe Erwachen." (Z.) "Is she besieged, then He is Himself besieged within her, and we may be certain that He will break forth upon His adversaries. How near is the Lord to the distress of His saints, since He sojourns in their midst! Let us take heed not to grieve Him. . . . How can she be moved unless her enemies move her Lord also? His presence renders all hope of capturing and demolishing the city utterly ridiculous. . . . Within her He will furnish rich supplies, and outside her walls He will lay her foes in heaps like the armies of Sennacherib, when the angel went forth and smote them. . . . The Lord is up betimes. We are slow to meet Him, but He is never tardy in helping us. Impatience complains of divine delays, but the Lord is not slack concerning His promise. Man's haste is often folly, but God's apparent delays are ever wise; and when rightly viewed, are no delays at all. Today the bands of evil may environ the Church of God and threaten her with destruction; but ere long they shall pass away like foam on the waters, and the noise of their tumult shall be silent in the grave. The darkest hour of the night is just before the turning of the morning; and then, even then, shall the Lord appear as the great ally of His Church." (Sp.)

6. "Nations roar, kingdoms quake; He utters His voice, the earth melts." Here is an allusion to the roaring, foaming sea. "Utters," lit., gave (a sound) with His voice. This voice does not assuage the commotion, but rather increases it by dissolving the very earth (A). "The nations were in a furious uproar; they gathered against the city of the Lord like wolves ravenous for their prey; they foamed and roared and swelled like a tempestuous sea. 'The kingdoms were moved.' A general confusion seized upon society, the fierce invaders convulsed their own dominions by draining the population to urge on war. . . . Crowns fell from royal heads, ancient thrones rocked like trees driven of the tempest, powerful empires fell like pines uprooted by the blast. Everything was in disorder, and dismay seized on all who knew not the Lord. . . . With no other instrumentality than a word the Lord ruled the storm. He gave forth a voice, and stout hearts were dissolved, proud armies were annihilated, conquering powers were enfeebled. At first the confusion appeared to be worse confounded when the elements of divine power came into view; the very earth seemed turned to wax, the most solid and substantial of human things melted . . . but anon peace followed, the rage of man subsided, hearts capable of repentance relented, and the implacable were silenced. How mighty is a word from God! How mighty the incarnate Word! Oh, that such a word would come from the excellent glory even now to melt all hearts in love to Jesus and to end forever all the persecutions, wars, and rebellions of men!" (Sp.) "Es kostet Gott nur ein Wort, nur einen Donner seiner Allmacht, nur einen Blitz seines Zorns, und das freche Toben der Voelker und das trotzige Erheben der Erdbewohner schmilzt dahin; ihr stolzer Mut wird feiges Verzagen, ihre weltbewegende Kraft wird jaemerliche Ohnmacht" (Z).

7. "Jehovah of Hosts (is) with us; a Refuge for us (is) the God of Jacob. Selah." In spite of commotions and dangers, divine protection makes us perfectly secure. "Jehovah of Hosts," the God of the universe, especially of the heavenly hosts. All creatures form a mighty army whose Commander in Chief is God. All creatures obey God, except the devils and men. One single angel is a match for all the armies of the ungodly. The Lord does not even have to use mighty angels to subdue His foes. He can use the tiniest

microbe to carry out His will. "With us" reminds us of "Immanuel," Is. 8:8. "Refuge," lit., a high place, beyond the reach of enemies and dangers (A), *Hochburg* (Ge). "Jacob," all believers who are Israelites indeed (Gi).

8. "Come, see the works of Jehovah, who puts (causes) desolations on the earth." "Whenever we read history, it should be with this verse sounding in our ears. We should read the newspaper in the same spirit to see how the Head of the Church rules the nations for his people's good. . . . The ruined cities of Assyria, Babylon, etc. . . . are our instructors and in tables of stone record the doings of the Lord. In every place where His cause and crown have been disregarded ruin has surely followed; sin has been a blight on nations and left their palaces to lie in heaps. . . . Dismantled castles and ruined abbeys in our land stand as memorials of the Lord's victories over oppression and superstition. May there soon be more of such desolations." (Sp.) Dreadful desolations have taken place in this century, more dreadful ones seem to be in the offing. "The desolations should teach the nations to know the power of Jehovah and to fear Him whose desolations aim at establishing peace, whose killing results in life insurance" (Sc).

9. "Silencing wars to the end of the earth; the bow he breaks and cuts the spear in sunder, chariots he burns in the fire."—"You cannot stop war and strife by force because the will to fight is not changed; people always will find time and occasion to begin war, before force can stop them. . . . But this is the real masterpiece which Christ uses in His kingdom to preserve everlasting peace by uniting the hearts. He not only stops the fist and puts down arms, but He removes the will to fight and the contentious heart. That is truly consuming war by fire, to suffer everything with love, not to fight for our own sake." (Luther in E.) There is no war in the city of God. Unbelievers will continue to fight till the Judgment Day will stop them.

10. "Desist and know that I (am) God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted on the earth." These words are spoken to the discomfited foes of Jehovah and also to His people (A). It is a majestic "Hands off" (K). God wants to bring also His enemies to their senses, to repentance, while they still have a

chance. All their attacks cannot dethrone Him, put Him out of existence. They are destroying themselves. These words may also be applied to believers when they are in danger of being overwhelmed by fear. Then the Lord tells them: "Be still, stop fretting and worrying, don't forget that I am God, that I am able and willing to deliver you from all your troubles."

11. "Jehovah of Hosts (is) with us; a Refuge for us (is) the God of Jacob. Selah." This triumphant shout of confidence and defiance, which closed the second strophe, is here repeated and closes the entire Psalm. This blessed truth deserves to be sung twice, it does not get tiresome to a believer. We cannot hear it too often, because we often forget it (K). As long as the Lord of Hosts is with us, all is well, we need not fear.

In the time of the Reformation the Pope and the Turk were the most formidable enemies of the Church. Although many do not realize it, the Pope is still such an enemy, no essential change has taken place. The blasphemous decree of the Council of Trent, putting a curse on *sola gratia*, has not been revoked; it is still official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. The hands of this Church are stained with the blood of many saints. Individual Catholics may have regretted and may still regret the atrocities perpetrated by their Church, but the Roman Catholic Church as such has never publicly repented of these crimes. The severe verdict of our Confessions, denouncing the Pope as the very Antichrist, is still true.

The Turk is no longer a threat as a political power, but Islam still is. In some parts of the world Islam is gaining ground at the expense of Christianity.

There is the dreadful monster of Communism, occupying a large part of Europe and Asia, growing by leaps and bounds, steadily undermining many other countries from within. Communism is not only a political theory, but it is a fanatical obsession, yea, a devilish religion.

To these enemies which threaten the Church from without must be added paganism and atheism; from within she is threatened by worldliness and indifference, unionism and separatism.

When we commemorate the Reformation of the Church by Luther, it is well to recognize and face the enemies threatening us today. Humanly speaking, the future of the Church does not

look very promising. We are facing overwhelming odds, but also we can boldly bid defiance to all our foes and say: "God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present Help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear.—The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our Refuge."

HOMILETICAL SUGGESTIONS

If at all possible, the entire Psalm should be used as text. The main theme is stated in v. 1: "God Is Our Refuge and Strength," etc. This main thought is repeated and emphasized in the refrain at the end of the second and third strophe. Follow the development of the main thought verse by verse without getting lost in, and side-tracked by, too much detail, pausing and recapitulating the principal points at each *Selah*, especially at the end. This Psalm is an impressive, powerful work of art. Its beautiful symmetry should not be destroyed by forcing an artificial outline upon it or by tearing it to pieces. "Dieser kurze, kraeftige Psalm . . . der das Bleiben der Civitas Dei in allen Zeiten, das Zugrundegehen der Welt, soweit sie sich nicht anschlieszt, kraeftig und schoen hinmalt" (Sc). As soon as possible after the sermon "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" should be sung as a mighty Amen by the congregation.

OUTLINES

Theme: "God Protects His City. Cease Oppressing Her"

- I. Vv. 1-3: God is for His own a Rock in a raging sea.
- II. Vv. 4-7: He gladdens and protects especially His city.
- III. Vv. 8-11: Therefore, ye nations of the earth, cease your enmity and acknowledge Jehovah's supremacy (Sc).

Theme: "The Song of Confidence and Defiance of the Lutheran Church"

- I. Vv. 1-3: The defiance of the Church hurled at the raving and raging of her enemies.
- II. Vv. 4-7: The sure repose and security of the Church in the midst of all her enemies.
- III. Vv. 8-11: The glory of the Church at the destruction of her enemies (K).

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