

“The Impregnable Fortress”

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¹In you, O LORD, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. ²In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me.

³Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.

⁴Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.

⁵For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth.

⁶Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb.

My praise is continually of you.

(Psalm 71)

It was believed that the mighty walls of Constantinople were impregnable, and for many years, they seemed to be. Built by Constantine the Great in the 5th Century, the ramparts and walls that surrounded the Byzantine capital on all sides were state of the art, the most advanced defensive battlements the world had ever known. With a solid garrison of soldiers, the system of double walls, terraces, and a significant moat successfully defended the city from would-be invaders for more than 800 years.

But on April 6, 1453, the fortress finally met its match. Under the leadership of commander Mehmed II, who was only 21 years old at the time, the Ottoman Empire laid siege to the city. The attackers had the advantage of a brand-new technology: gunpowder. Large siege cannons relentlessly pounded the walls for 55 days, culminating in the Fall of Constantinople on May 29th. The conquest marked the end of the Byzantine Empire, a major turning point in Western history, and one of the main transitions reflecting the end of the Middle Ages and the advent of the Renaissance. A new generation, in a new era, with new technology had once again shown that, no matter how strenuously we may work at it, we human beings have never built, and will never build, a truly impregnable fortress. There is always a weakness, always a vulnerability.

Just a few days ago a friend of mine from high school posted on social media about his concern for starving children around the world, especially those who had been dependent upon food and resources once provided by the USAID program. In the comments section, one of his friends challenged him. “So I guess foreign children are more important than the children we have right here at home??” the friend fired back.

No, my friend responded. I’m worried about them, too. Especially with the cuts being made to the National School Lunch program.

To which his critic simply replied, “Our country first!!!”

I get it that this is a popular sentiment these days, and I understand that reasonable people can disagree about the priorities that should be set when resources are limited. But in this particular case, as I read through the tempest in a teacup that erupted in the comments section after my friend expressed his concern for starving children, what became clear to me is that this idea is grounded in what we might call a “siege mentality.” A siege mentality is a state of mind in which one feels like they are surrounded or under attack by enemies. It is a perspective that retreats into a defensive bunker because it sees everyone “out there” as a threat. On a personal and social level, a siege mentality adopts the strategy of ancient Constantinople. We will erect high walls and defenses



around ourselves, this mentality says. We will hole up in a mighty system of defenses, we will stick to ourselves, we will hold onto our resources, and this will keep us safe.

There is logic to it, we have to admit, but the problem with a siege mentality is that the only thing it can see is a threat. It requires, even demands, that all attention, all energy, and all resources be conscripted and devoted to a last-ditch defense. This all-or-nothing thinking leaves no room for disagreement, no room for nuance, no room for learning or growth or development. It is a mentality rooted in fear and isolation. And it is based on the fallacy – or to put it more strongly, the lie – that we can somehow build fortifications around ourselves that are big enough and strong enough to keep out all the things that we fear the most.

And that is what brings us to this ancient prayer, a poem penned by a writer who clearly feels at risk in the world. Deliver me, pleads the psalmist. Rescue me. Save me. Be for me a rock of refuge. Be my strong fortress that will never fall.

The focus on safe places is a very common theme in the psalms. Psalm 18, for example proclaims *“The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”* But Psalm 18 is different, because it is retrospective. In that ancient song, the writer is remembering a time in the past when they had been in great danger, a time of terror when the cords of death were strangling them and the snares of death had taken hold of them. And in their distress that person of faith had cried out to God for help. Thankfully, their plea had been heard, and God came down with the full power and might of heaven to eliminate the threat and keep them safe. Psalm 18 is a profession of faith that had been proven.

Psalm 71, on the other hand, is more like a plea from the abyss. This prayer comes from the mouth of someone in very real and present danger. This prayer is for help that is needed urgently, immediately. And the outcome of this situation is, in this moment, far from certain. Please rescue me, please save me, please be my fortress in the storm right here and right now.

In this way, the two psalms are very different, but they are similar in one very important respect. When these psalmists speak of a rock, they are not speaking about a granite boulder. When they imagine a fortress, they are not thinking of walls built with brick and mortar or ramparts protected by a moat. When they cry out for a place of refuge, they are not picturing any kind of structure built with human hands or any strategy concocted by human minds. For these people of faith, there is only one truly impregnable fortress, and it is God.

I think all of us understand that to some degree. I think that is why we are here. At some level we are all drawn here by some inkling of faith – perhaps merely a distant hope -- that there is a benevolent power at the center of creation who loves us, wants the best for us, and is looking out for us. I believe that hope is hardwired into every human heart and that this is the image of God in every person.

But our minds? That is a different story. Our hearts can hold onto thoughts of God, but in times of trouble our minds start searching frantically for things that are a lot more tangible. When we are afraid we don't want a theoretical fortress; we want the Walls of Constantinople, with their iron gates, their tall towers, and a moat that is deep and wide. Our heart may be like a young Luke Skywalker, trying its best to rely on a mystical Force that holds the universe together... but our minds are standing squarely with Han Solo, because “hokey religions and ancient weapons are no match for a good blaster at your side.”

I think that is one of the reasons why Christ gave us the church. The church is not a building built with hands, but church buildings do give us a place to go when we are seeking the presence of God. When we need comfort and reassurance, we can find in the church a welcoming smile, a much-needed hug, a gentle hand to help lift us up or find our way. The church is a kind of compromise – something that stands between a faith that is completely ethereal and a reality that is completely

tangible. Just as Jesus Christ was, is, and shall be, the church – as the body of Christ – is both divine and human, both immortal and mortal. Through the ages, many faithful people have expressed a sentiment that is attributed to Pope Cyril VI, the 20th Century leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church, who proclaimed, “Nothing in this world can distress or perturb me, for I take refuge in the impregnable fortress of the Church.”

And yet, as faithful as that statement is, it has a fatal flaw. While the enduring strength of the church is the Christ who still abides here, its unavoidable weakness is the fact that the church is made up of human beings. The church is fallible, because we are fallible. That is why we, in the Reformed Tradition, hold fast to the Latin motto “*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*,” which means – we are the church reformed, always reforming. Or, more accurately, we are the church reformed, always being reformed.

The purpose of this constant reformation is not change just for the sake of change. It is the kind of reformation that is needed because our tendency is to stray from the straight and narrow path. As they say, “To err is human.” God is perfect but we are not. So we always have to be on the lookout for ways we are not living up to God’s standards. If we want to live lives that are straight, we will always need to adjust for error as we try our best to stay on course.

And this was exactly what the Reformed Martin Luther was trying to do. As a young peasant with an agile mind, Luther initially concentrated his studies on the law, hoping to become a lawyer. But on a cold, windy night in Germany in the early 1500s, as he was walking home in a storm, a bolt of lightning struck the ground right next to him. The difference between life and death was a matter of inches. Following that brush with death, he immediately left the law school and went straight to seminary. Later, as a leading voice of the Reformation, he would encounter a different kind of peril – the kind that finds you when you begin to speak out against injustice, speak out for change, speak out in ways that challenge powerful people in powerful places. Excommunicated by the church in 1521, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V quickly proclaimed Luther to be a heretic. And, although he did not go so far as to send assassins out to find him, the Emperor did make it clear that this outlaw should be hunted down, with the implication that a good Catholic would do their duty and get rid of this menace for the greater good.¹

It was in this time of turmoil that Luther sat down to write one of the most enduring hymns in all of Christendom. I still remember the feeling I had watching the proceedings at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C., just three days after the horrific attacks on 9/11, as the gathered congregation stood to sing together the words Luther had penned nearly 500 years before. With smoke still rising from the crumbled walls of the Twin Towers and the symbolic ramparts of the Pentagon, I, like many around the world, added my own voice to those in the cathedral itself as we made one, collective confession of faith: “A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing; our helper he, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.”

If I have heard it once, I have heard it a hundred times... a person trying to recover from a tragic loss saying to me “I don’t know how anyone could make it through something like this if they did not have faith.” They, more than anyone, know that, when everything else was falling apart, when it felt like life itself was crumbling around them, the only sure footing they could find was in God. Their stronghold was knowing that the light of heaven would somehow prevail over the power of darkness. And their cry was the same as the psalmists of old: “*Be to me, Lord, my rock of refuge; rescue me, save me, for you are the one and only impregnable fortress. Amen.*”

¹ <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/january-3/martin-luther-excommunicated>