

Hymn of the Month

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God (LSB 657)

It is October, a month filled with pumpkin spice lattes, harvest decor, and the occasional gaudy Halloween lawn inflatables; but for Lutherans everywhere, this month is dominated by its very last day: the celebration of the Reformation! Amidst reposting Luther memes and declaring the papacy to be the antichrist, the soundtrack playing in all our heads is none other than the battle hymn of the Reformation: “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

As you probably know, Martin Luther wrote these lyrics; but what you may not know is that he wrote them around 1528, well into his conflict with the Roman Catholic Church... This was a period marked by a serious epidemic in Wittenberg (...perhaps like our own times?), menacing Turkish forces at the door of the Holy Roman Empire, and severe religious attacks—theological and political—from both Roman Catholics and radical Protestants. Although we think of this hymn as somewhat militant, it was thought of at the time primarily as a hymn of *comfort*. Amidst all the turmoil of the time, it offered the solace of the Gospel message: Satan has been utterly vanquished by our victor Jesus, and even in our own present sufferings, we can take comfort in knowing that “The Kingdom’s ours forever.”

In addition to eradicating heresies, a major emphasis of Luther’s reforms was to put the Word of God back into the mouth of the common man. The Roman Catholic Church conducted its masses in Latin, which meant that the average Christian couldn’t understand the liturgy on Sunday mornings or the Bible readings he heard. And, since there was no such thing as an in-home Bible, much less one in the vernacular, this meant the majority of normal Christians were completely biblically illiterate. Priests muttered the mass, choirs sang the music at church, and your only job was to come occasionally, do penances, and buy indulgences. You weren’t even allowed to have the Blood of Christ at communion! By translating the Bible and the liturgy into German, Martin Luther made this mysterious religion suddenly accessible to every peasant. And more than that, he

spearheaded a movement of hymn-writing for congregational singing; this put the Faith back into the mouth of every blacksmith and farmer.

A source of many of Luther's hymns, and of Lutheran poets who followed, was the psalms. But, of course, knowing the Gospel, Luther could not help but read Christ into the psalms. This means that his musical paraphrases would not simply parrot the psalm itself; rather, it would show how Christ is very much *in* that psalm as the speaker, the doer of the action, etc. So, taking our hymn of the month as an example, Luther began with Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble..." Psalm 46, wonderful as it is, has no explicit reference to Jesus or His vanquishing of Satan. It does, however, speak of all the troubles of this world, from natural disasters to the enemy threatening our life, reiterating time and again that God is with us and that He is our refuge and deliverer. Well, it doesn't take the Christian much effort to see the clear Christological story of this psalm! Despite the raging of Satan against us, we know that God is our refuge (a *mighty fortress*, you might say!), and that Jesus has defeated our dreadful enemy. Suddenly it makes sense that Luther waxes poetical about the cosmic battle between Christ and Satan in this beloved hymn.

The first stanza of this hymn begins with, of course, God, who is our fortress, our shield, our victorious sword. But it wastes no time exposing us to the conflict: the old satanic foe besieges us, and on earth he has no equal. Drama!

Stanza two begins with our pathetic plight, for we find ourselves completely incapable of doing battle against the satanic horde. But, now a champion comes to fight! Who could this be? In dramatic swell, the song declares, "The Lord of Hosts is He, Christ Jesus, mighty Lord"! Here we find no mysterious deity, shrouded in cloud and darkness, but the revealed Son of God, come to do battle on our behalf.

The third stanza sees hordes of devils at the battle line, the world's tyrant raging, Satan waiting to devour us; and yet, despite all this, "one little word" undoes him entirely. That little word is none other than the name of Jesus, who *is* the Word. Beautiful, isn't it, that God's strength is made perfect in weakness, that one Word can topple all the powers of hell!

We end our hymn with stanza four: "God's Word forever shall abide"! Echoing previous stanzas, we sing that regardless of what Satan strips from us—house,

goods, honor, or even family!—there is nothing he can take that will touch our salvation. Indeed, “The Kingdom’s ours forever”!

Now, most of us are familiar with what we call the “rhythmic” version of this hymn (otherwise known as LSB 656). This is the original melody of the German hymn that Luther wrote, *Ein Feste Burg*. But you will notice that our hymn of the month is the “isorhythmic” version, LSB 657. So, what’s the difference? And why are we doing the un-original one?

The English translations are slightly different in these two versions, but they originate from the same German hymn written by Martin Luther. Even their tunes are recognizably very similar. What is different is their *rhythm*. LSB 656 uses a syncopated rhythm, meaning that it emphasizes off-beats, or beats that are normally unaccented. This makes for a very lively, driving melody.

But remember, this is the Reformation! A time when the song of the Church is given back to the congregation to sing. Well, when you have a congregation singing a syncopated hymn in a big, echoey stone church building, the singing starts... to... slooow... doooooown... And over the course of a couple generations (from the 1600’s to the 1700’s), the rhythmic nuances of the tune started to disappear. Now, rather than lively and varied, the notes were all held for the same length... and when lots of German hymns were translated into English in the 1800s, it was the popular equal-note versions that made it into British and eventually American hymnals. Hence 657.

Although this little explanation may make it seem like 657 is less authentic than 656, there is a twist! One of the greatest composers of all time, Johann Sebastian Bach, happened to be a Lutheran! If you know anything about Bach (1685-1750), you may recall that he lived during the very time when our hymn was slowing to its isorhythmic version. He famously arranged this version for choral singing, and that is the music we have in our hymn 657 today!

Interestingly, during the compilation of the LSB, the committee in charge decided to include both versions of our beloved hymn with the recommendation that the original 656 be used for congregational singing, while 657 be reserved for choral singing (a la Bach). Feliculously, Christ Lutheran sings 656 every year at the Feast of the Reformation, and we very much enjoy its rigorous rhythms and feisty translation. But this month, we are taking the opportunity to appreciate the

musical treasure we have in 657. And if you join the choir (shameless plug!) you might just get a chance to sing it in all of its four-part glory!

Fun Facts: Martin Luther, in addition to being a thoughtful theologian and gifted polyglot, was a *musician*! In fact, he was a fine composer in his own right and even wrote polyphonic motets, one of which we still have today. Not only is he responsible for the lyrics of “A Mighty Fortress,” but he also composed the tune we find in hymn 656.

Fun Facts: Although the rhythmic version slowly morphed into the isorhythmic, somehow we recovered the original version... how did that happen? Well, there was a movement in Germany in the 1800’s to reinvigorate hymn singing by restoring original rhythmic versions of these songs. A young pastor and organist who became a big proponent of this movement was none other than... C.F.W. Walther! In fact, in 1847, his congregation compiled a new hymnal that gained traction in much of the synod, and they held regular rehearsals to learn the original rhythmic versions of these hymns.

Fun Facts: What the heck is “isorhythmic”? *Iso-* means “same,” so *isorhythm* literally means “the same rhythm.” It is a reference to using a repeating rhythmic pattern. So, for example, we call this month’s hymn “isorhythmic” because its original syncopation has been straightened out into a regular quarter note pattern.