Texts in Context

“A Mighty Fortress” and Psalm 46 in Context

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THE CONTEXT

The psalmody in the church’s lectionaries provides the necessary context for our proper understanding of “A Mighty Fortress” and its relation to Ps 46. This use of psalmody was spawned by the synagogue service, where it came between the reading of the Law and the Prophets. The church’s historic lectionaries, including the Revised Common Lectionary, follow this pattern. The intervening Psalm and Verse (Gospel Acclamation) are not two more readings in a series of five. They are the congregation’s and the choir’s musical parts that come between the Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel readings. Even if the readings are intoned, the Psalm and Verse still remain a heightened musical expression. The Psalm is not simply a response to the Old Testament reading, but sets the context of humanity in all of its highest and lowest moments before God in relation to the readings. The Verse sheds the light of Christ on this context.

Psalmody breaks into communal song because the context it reflects requires the relationships music supplies, ones that lie beyond words and their rationality. Like music itself, the psalms are about the relationship between humanity and time, and, in the case of the psalms, about the relationship between humanity and God as well, so that they naturally take on musical form. This is true when the con-
gregation only sings a refrain, which gives the essence of the psalm, or when the congregation sings the whole psalm. Singing the whole psalm to a psalm tone in tandem with a cantor and choir means the performance practice can express not only the relational character of the context, but can also match the specificity of the Psalm’s content on a given day. This is especially clear when there is no instrumental or amplified interference. That usually means using no instruments (and certainly no amplification) at all, though very skillful organists can provide an exegetical backdrop that does not get in the way.

I discovered this context with its congregational, psalmic, and musical components not by reading about it or by abstractly theorizing about it or by following what those who fashioned the Revised Common Lectionary intended (which hints at it slightly),¹ but by worshiping with congregations who over time have been disciplined by the lectionary and have sung the psalms.

It became especially clear to me when an old man said that his church had just begun singing psalm tones and that for the first time in his life he was able to sing in church. It then dawned on me more forcefully than before that the congregational genre of psalm tones is quintessentially congregational and, additionally, that there is a counterintuitive corollary: congregations that sing psalm tones seem to be able to sing almost any musical congregational genre they encounter, whereas ones that don’t cannot. Why? Because in a psalm tone sung without instrumental or amplified interference a congregation finds its communal voice, breathes together, phrases together, and embodies the psalms’ meanings together. Speaking cannot facilitate this proclamatory relational ordering of context nearly so well, if at all. George Black, a perceptive leader of congregational song and a former president of the Hymn Society, told me that sometimes a congregation has to be left alone to find its voice. That is what psalm tones provide—a frame on which to improvise the psalms’ new song. This is a song that has never been heard before and will never be heard again in exactly the way any particular assembly spins it out on any given day; yet this “new song” is the same as always. It gives the context of God’s steadfast love that the church has known and has sung from the beginning.

Finding its voice via the psalms explains why the church has fashioned so much proclamatory music that provides context in connection with the readings. This music includes the simplest congregational psalm tones, the most complex

¹See *The Revised Common Lectionary: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012) 217, where the second principle for psalm selection says, “The psalms shall fit harmoniously within the general tenor of the celebration.”
choral pieces, and mixes—from Psalm and Verse settings to sequences, gradualls, motets, anthems, hymns of the day, concertatos, and cantatas. This huge repertoire has been made possible by God’s gift of music, which, in addition to mnemonic associative possibilities, also has relational acoustic properties: more than one voice together can sing or play a single note, a stack of notes, and independent musical lines without cancelling one another out. Martin Luther referenced this when he said that “it is possible to taste with wonder (yet not to comprehend) God’s absolute and perfect wisdom in his wondrous work of music.”

Luther’s vision helps to clarify why the Lutheran stream through its music and musicians has run out this part of the church’s being with such extraordinary perspicacity and skill. And the Lutheran stream gives us the clearest insight into this proclamatory contextual landscape of the church, from the simplest psalm or hymn tune to the complexity of the music of the “fifth evangelist,” J. S. Bach (1685–1750). Bach is a prime exemplar and his music a prime example. Consider the following instance. (Though there are those who doubt the connections, I find them hard to miss.) In the last movement of the last cantata—the sixth one, for Epiphany—of his Christmas Oratorio (BWV 248), Bach concluded with the tune for “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” but used a Christus Victor text about Christ winning the battle over sin and death, accompanied by trumpets and timpani. Lenten and Easter themes are combined at the manger in one single musical tableau. (Bach’s use of a secular or sacred work he had written earlier seems to me to be irrelevant. Parody or not, Bach chose carefully and exegeted carefully.)

THE TEXTS

Psalm 46 is the basis for Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress,” which figures in this issue of Word & World because of its war imagery. Psalm 46 is structured in three parts: (1) the narrator proclaims God as refuge so that we do not have to fear; (2) the narrator continues: God is in the midst of the city that shall not be shaken, where a river’s streams make it glad; even when nations rage God speaks, and the earth melts away; (3) the narrator bids us consider the works of the Lord, the desolations God has wrought on earth, making war to cease, breaking the bow, shattering the spear, and burning shields with fire. God’s voice concludes the third part, bidding us to be still and know this God who is exalted. Between the second and third sections the community sings, “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold,” which is repeated at the end of the psalm. The Lutheran Book of Worship, following the Book of Common Prayer, inserts this refrain between the first two parts as well, a move that worship planners regularly make when they in-

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2This does not in any way deny that the music of the church also carries its praise, prayer, and story, which I have explained in The Church Musician, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), and The Heart of the Matter: Church Music as Praise, Prayer, Proclamation, Story, and Gift (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2001).

sert refrains into psalms for certain emphases. In this case, the logic of inserting the refrain after the first section is dictated by its use twice later and splits the psalm into three coherent units of three verses each.

The Psalm begins with God as our refuge and strength, “Zuversicht und Stärke.” The refrain drives the point home with God as our stronghold, “unser Schütz.” The point of the war imagery here is not that we are to battle with others, but that God battles for us so that we are to have no fear. Some German Bibles head the Psalm “Der Kirche Zuversicht. Freude und Trost” (“The Church’s Confidence. Joy and Comfort”) or “Der Kirche Trost und Sicherheit” (“The Church’s Comfort and Certainty”).

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In his paraphrase of Ps 46, Luther turned “Zuversicht und Stärke” into “Ein feste Burg,” a solid castle, a mighty fortress, or, in Thomas Carlyle’s translation, a safe stronghold. We learn immediately that this God frees us from every affliction and need (“Not”) and fights for us against the evil enemy (“böse Feind”). The next three stanzas explicate the first. Our might is powerless against this enemy, but Jesus Christ, the Lord of hosts, fights for us. Even if the world is filled with devils, we have nothing to fear because the prince of this world (“der Fürst dieser Welt”) can be felled by one little word (“ein Wörtlein kann ihn fallen”). That little word—Jesus Christ, the Lord of hosts, the Incarnate Word—is with us in the arena of our living and gives us the kingdom even if life, goods, child, and spouse are taken away.

TEXTS IN CONTEXT

If Luther’s hymn is understood to intensify the war imagery, it does so by intensifying the sense of God’s battle on our behalf. “A Mighty Fortress” nonetheless has been called the “Battle Hymn” or “Marseillaise” of the Reformation, and it has been used as a war song or battle cry by some groups against other groups. (For more about this, see Susan Palo Cherwien’s article in this issue). Luther did not regard it that way. He saw it as a hymn of comfort—a “trost” Psalm, the title on its Augsburg broadsheet. Since the hymn is so well known and is a vernacular paraphrase of Ps 46, the psalm itself has sometimes also been viewed as a battle cry for a

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4Evangelical Lutheran Worship is closer to the Hebrew and does not make this move.

select group of people against others. The church’s use of Ps 46, as the titles for it in
the German Bible suggest, does not match such a view either. It matches Luther’s
understanding of his hymn, or, more correctly, Luther’s understanding matches
the church’s—not surprisingly, since Luther read the mind of the church so well.

The mind of the church is expressed in its lectionaries. In the Revised Com-
mon Lectionary, Ps 46 is used on three occasions, with the following readings.

Easter Vigil
  Gen 7:1–5, 11–18; 8:6–10; 9:8–13, the flood (the second reading)
  Ps 46, refrain: “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our
  stronghold.”

May 29 to June 4, Lectionary 9, Year A
  Gen 6:9–22; 7:24; 8:14–19, semi-continuous reading, the flood
  Rom 1:16–17; 3:22b–28 [29–31], justified by grace as a gift
  Matt 7:21–29, doing the works of God
  Ps 46, refrain: “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our
  stronghold.”

Christ the King, Year C
  Jer 23:1–6, God comes to raise up shepherds so the people will not
  fear
  Col 1:11–20, Christ the firstborn of creation
  Ps 46, refrain: “I will be exalted among the nations.”

Psalm 46 functions on the first two of these occasions in connection with the
flood “to proclaim God’s rule over chaos.” For Lectionary 9, justification by grace
and doing God’s works are added. For Christ the King, the themes are the coming
of the shepherd, Christ who has dominion over all things, and the crucifixion. The
two occasions related to the flood employ the refrain built into Ps 46 at verses 7 and
11: “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.” For the
Reign of Christ, the refrain takes the words of God from Ps 46:10: “I will be exalted
among the nations.”

Lutherans have often included a Hymn of the Day with the lectionary’s read-
ings. Evangelical Lutheran Worship suggests “A Mighty Fortress” as the Hymn of
the Day on Lent 1 for all three years.

Year A
  Gen 2:15–17; 3:1–7, eating from the tree of knowledge
  Rom 5:12–19, the free gift of grace in Jesus
  Matt 4:1–11, the temptation of Jesus
  Ps 32, refrain: “Mercy embraces those who trust in the Lord.”

Year B
  Gen 9:8–17, the rainbow

7 The Revised Common Lectionary, 27.
1 Pet 3:18–22, baptism prefigured in the flood
Mark 1:9–15, the temptation of Jesus
Ps 25:1–10, refrain: “Your paths, O Lord, are steadfast love and faithfulness.”

Year C
Deut 26:1–11, deliverance from Egypt
Rom 10:8b–13, all who call on the Lord will be saved (no distinctions);
Luke 4:1–13, the temptation of Jesus
Ps 91:1–2, 9–16, refrain: “God will give the angels charge over you, to guard you in all your ways.”

For Lent 1, the temptation of Christ is a central feature, allied to related themes—the temptation in the garden, grace, the promise in the rainbow and baptism, and deliverance from Egypt with the opportunity for all people to call on God. In years A and B, God’s mercy and faithfulness summarize Pss 32 and 25, and in Year C, God’s guarding us does it for Ps 91. As for the Sundays where Ps 46 is used, so also when “A Mighty Fortress” is the Hymn of the Day, God in Christ as refuge is central.

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It may be possible to take Ps 46 or “A Mighty Fortress” by themselves and make them into battle cries for one group against others (as some have done), although that seems quite a stretch, but the message the church proclaims makes that impossible unless you twist worship to your own purposes or obliterate it. The lectionary and the psalmic context illustrate this. The contextual landscape the psalm sketches and the preacher’s more laser-like beam are about the mercy, faithfulness, and steadfast love of God where refuge and strength are to be found. That is the continuing theme throughout all of these uses of Ps 46 and the hymn Luther created from it with the readings that surround them. God fights for us, and “the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.” Indeed, as the psalm itself says, God makes war to cease, breaks the bow, shatters the spear, and burns up the shields.

PREACHING THE TEXT

The psalmic context is proclamatory, as is preaching. I have just hinted at how the two relate, but that needs further explanation. The two are complemen-
tary: neither can do what the other one does; they need to be understood together.

The psalmic context, even in its simplest form, sketches a tableau. The music of a psalm tone or a hymn tune may not do this the way the music of a Bach cantata does it, but a tableau is there nonetheless because of music’s associative mnemonic capacities and acoustic properties. No individual preacher can accomplish this. The most an individual preacher can do is to speak about themes of Easter, Lent, and Christmas one after the other or side by side, but she or he cannot embody them simultaneously the way Bach’s cantata for Epiphany does or any music, especially music with words.

But music cannot do what the preacher can do either. Music, precisely because it cannot avoid calling into play a wider context, cannot shine a searing white-hot laser beam on a topic the way a preacher can. Even intoning a sermon brings with it an aural set of associations that of necessity calls attention to what lies beyond the center—maybe beautifully, but it blurs the focus nonetheless. That is partly why readings have been intoned, to bring with them a contextual construal—which has led to Gospel motets, Passion settings, and settings of the Easter and Christmas narratives—with and without inserted commentaries. Sermons, however, inevitably begin with speech or at least something closer to speech. They may break into song and carry congregations into it with them, but this becomes a celebrative response to the word that is preached, a natural result that passes beyond the proclamation itself.

There are manipulative temptations and dangers in both the music and the preaching. As long as both musicians and preachers are disciplined by the lectionary, however, these are subverted by the freedom the gospel brings with it. That freedom cannot, of course, be guaranteed, like all things to which human beings set their hands. That is one reason the church continually gravitates to the liturgy and to its lectionary across denominational boundaries—to protect us from ourselves individually and as groups with checks and balances. The lectionary sets texts next to one another so that they cannot be construed in idiosyncratic and self-serving ways.

The judgment of the flood is set alongside justification, which suggests there is nothing we can do, which is then set alongside a call to do something. The preacher is called to highlight a theme like judgment in Jeremiah, but cannot hijack it for selfish purposes. Musicians are called to spin out a contextual frame about grace, but they cannot turn it into the sentimental mist of cheap grace with no
spine. Communities of faith cannot focus on themselves at the expense of others or use texts as battle cries against other groups. Single groups together with the church catholic, preacher and musician, speech and music, laser beam and context, and readings set next to one another help to propel the freedom of the gospel with checks on our selfish agendas. Turning Ps 46 and “A Mighty Fortress” into a war cry on behalf of one group against another group is to remove the checks and to give free reign to the enemy who is beyond identification with any human person or group but who can be felled with one little word.

**ONE LITTLE WORD, AND REFUGE AND STRENGTH**

J. S. Bach ran out the proclamatory musical implications of the church to which Luther and the Lutheran Reformation gave renewed expression. A whole stream of composers has done this from the sixteenth century to the present moment, but Bach did it as well as—or probably better than—anybody else. This is evident in his cantatas, his major compositional output. They were composed for Sunday morning services in connection with the readings and the sermon. He often employed chorales in them. He presumed the congregation’s role in singing these throughout worship services, but his vocation was not to write them. His vocation was to write choral music that proclaimed the gospel in connection with the people’s proclamation. It is always instructive therefore to find out how he handled chorales like “A Mighty Fortress” and what proclamatory context he sketched.

In Leipzig, where Bach spent the last quarter of his life as cantor, the Sunday morning service began at seven o’clock and lasted until about eleven o’clock, depending upon how long communion took. Except for the last three Sundays in Advent and for Lent, cantatas were heard each week in connection with the readings, the Hymn of the Day, and the sermon. The sermon with its laser beam lasted for an hour, the cantata with its context for less than half that long, sometimes divided on either side of the sermon. Cantatas were sometimes also used at communion, but their primary place was in connection with the proclamation of the word. Cantatas developed in Germany in the seventeenth century. Librettists provided the texts, stimulated in the eighteenth century by the work of Erdmann Neumeister (1671–1756) who wrote nine cycles of their texts. Composers like Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767), Bach, and many others wrote the music.

Cantata 80 is built on “A Mighty Fortress.” It comes to us in an incomplete version that Bach began in 1715 or 1716 at Weimar when he was the chamber musician and court organist there. He wrote it for the third Sunday in Lent. The court poet Salomon Franck wrote the libretto in five stanzas. Unlike Leipzig, in Weimar there was no restriction against cantatas in Advent and Lent. “A Mighty Fortress” was the Hymn of the Day. The readings were Eph 5:1–9—be imitators of God, put away impurity, do not be deceived by evil words, live as children of light; and Luke 11:14–28—Jesus casts out a demon and tells the people, “Blessed are they who hear the word of God and obey it.”
In Leipzig, Bach made a new version of the work for use between 1728 and 1731 for the Reformation festival. Now the readings were 2 Thess 2:3–8—let no one deceive you, for the day will not come unless the lawless one is revealed, destined for destruction; and Rev 14:6–8—fear God, give God glory, the hour of judgment has come. In the 1730s, Bach added a massive fugal first movement of the chorale’s first stanza, for the Reformation festival in 1740.

The Reformation festival could be viewed as an occasion to pit Lutherans against others. Bach could have employed trumpets and timpani, therefore, with military music to send a Lutheran army into battle against its neighbors. That is not what he wrote.

Bach inherited the isometric version of the chorale tune, which in its equal notes can suggest soldiers lined up in battle against others. Luther’s more flexible rhythmic version can suggest comfort. The Reformation festival could be viewed as an occasion to pit Lutherans against others. Bach could have employed trumpets and timpani, therefore, with military music to send a Lutheran army into battle against its neighbors. That is not what he wrote. Strings and oboes provide the instrumental forces. (Bach’s son Wilhelm Friedemann added trumpet and timpani.)

The final version is in eight movements with all four of the chorale stanzas and all five of Franck’s. (Movement 2 combines the two.)

1. The first stanza of the chorale. A festive party with many parts in a strong and safe castle that has many rooms. The fugue subject derived from the chorale tune is reminiscent of the original rhythmic version.

2. Bass aria, soprano with the second stanza of the chorale. The aria says that everything born of God is intended for victory, won in Christ in baptism. The chorale names Jesus the hero whom God chooses to fight for us since our own might is pointless. Albert Schweitzer calls the perpetual motion in the orchestra a tumult motive.8

3. Bass recitative. “Confess your guilt with grief and pain,” and an arioso with a melodic binding about being bound to Christ.

4. Soprano aria. A florid melody, hinting at the second phrase of the chorale tune, invites Jesus into “my heart’s abode” to drive out Satan.

5. The third stanza of the chorale. The chorale stands in a strong choral unison against the orchestra that Schweitzer says depicts “the assault of the devil on the citadel of God.” It mounts, sinks, recovers, makes another assault—“a wildly agitated mass”—and finally “falls to pieces.”9 One little word fells devils, no matter how many.


9Ibid., 246.
6. Recitative for tenor. Stand firm under Christ’s blood-stained banner, march joyfully to war, and hear God’s word under the refuge of the Savior. Joy and refuge are highlighted.

7. Duet for alto and tenor. Where is the war? In your heart in communal context. How blessed are those who carry God in their mouths—in word and sacrament. More blessed still those who carry God in their hearts in faith and destroy the foe. Oboe da caccia and violin, followed by the singers, spin out peaceful imitation. Things get agitated at the destruction of the foe and then revert to peace.

8. The final stanza of the chorale. A straightforward four-part setting summarizes: no matter what, the little word stands. We take refuge in God’s safe and festive castle.

“A Mighty Fortress” is about a word in Christ that fells the enemy, with God our refuge and strength. God makes war in the world to cease. “A Mighty Fortress” does not support war.

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Psalm "Eine mächtige Trutzburg im Sturm". Gott ist unsere Zuflucht und unsere Quelle der Kraft, steht uns zur Seite in unserer Not. Deshalb werden wir keine Angst haben, auch wenn die Welt untergeht. Auch wenn Berge im Meer versinken, auch wenn Wasser tosend sich erhebt. Beängstigend, wie es ist, wenn Berge erschüttert werden durch anschwellende Meere. So gibt es doch einen Fluss, dessen Ströme die Stadt unseres Gottes erfreuen. Der heilige Ort, an dem der Herr, seinen Wohnsitz hat. Gott wohnt in ihrer Mitte und nichts kann sie erschüttern. Psalm 46:10, is a popular verse for comforting ourselves and others—many people tend to think this verse means to rest or relax in who God is. This verse does encourage believers to reflect on who God is, but there is more to this psalm than one verse—and verse 10 is actually more of a wake-up call to be in awe than a gentle call to rest. In this article we'll take a look at the context of Psalm 46:10 and the various views on it; let's start by reading Psalm 46 in its entirety. He is a fortress and protects the weak that belong to him. The psalmist is probably living through some sort of turmoil or war as he mentions the phrases: trouble, the nations rage, the kingdoms totter, war, the spear, bow, and chariots—though the psalm is also pointing forward to a future time when wars will cease. Psalm 46 is the 46th psalm of the Book of Psalms, known in English by its beginning, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" in the King James Version. In the Greek Septuagint version of the Bible, and in its Latin translation in the Vulgate, this psalm is Psalm 45 in a slightly different numbering system. In Latin, it is known as "Deus noster refugium et virtus". The song is credited to the sons of Korah.