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## Sermon on Psalm 46<sup>1</sup>

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### **Text: Psalm 46**

This 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm is an ancient song, dear brothers and sisters,<sup>2</sup> an ancient song of sublime beauty. Its beauty has incited later generations to adopt it freely and they too succeeded, with songs of impressive beauty. Yet it is not the beauty of the Psalm which concerns us now, so much as the truth aflame in its beauty. Who can speak of God in this way? What sort of a people would it have been, which first sang this song? And why? On the basis of what experience *could* they, moreover *must* they, have sung such a song? And who can join in? Who can sing this song today, brothers and sisters? And, not least: *how* should one sing it? *C'est le ton, qui fait la musique*: the tone makes the music. Which tone, then, is appropriate for this old song?

In Lutheran Germany, this Psalm has been readily sung as a song of defiance, with faces directed straight at Rome. Luther's great chorale "*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*" was the Reformation version of this song. In my homeland, this chorale was sung far too militantly, far too stridently – even as a song of defiance, threateningly like a marching song: first and foremost against Rome and then equally, too, against the rest of the world. By contrast, Luther had sung his song *to the lute*, cautiously, tenderly and heartfelt. Luther's chorale is no marching order – not at all! And neither is its antecedent, the 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm.

Psalm 46 is much more like a song of trust for fugitives who sought a place in which they could be safe, and who have now, finally, *found* a truly safe place after every sort of deceptive, false security, which promises repose. Now they *are* sheltered. And now they praise this place of deliverance in which trust can be placed. Thereby they also make it trustworthy for many others, fugitives who

are *still* in flight: in flight from persecutors who need *slaves* because they think they cannot be free lords without people indentured to them; in flight from persecutors who ignore, if need be, even corpses; in flight from persecutors, into whose hands it then falls to decide either the end of their very freedom or the end of their very life – it remains to be seen which is worse. But now the hunted and pursued hear a song, whether it first be from further afield or already from close by, a song of trust in a saving place: “Behold, the city with its high walls, at which the pursuers are called to a halt! And look beyond, beyond to the fortress, with its moat, its drawbridge, its impregnable door. You are sheltered there – just as we are already sheltered!”

Whoever speaks or sings like this, has already experienced this saving place. To trust in such a city and fortress is, of course, completely different from a trust too freely given. It has a *Sitz im Leben*, namely “the great troubles which have beaten us.”<sup>3</sup> We would do well to say, today, that this trust is anything but starry eyed<sup>4</sup> – although in saying so, one most certainly does a terrible injustice to so many beautiful starry eyes. Still, starry eyes here, starry eyes there – the trust at issue for the psalmist is articulated in the face of the highest danger.

This fact comes to the fore, brothers and sisters, when we attend to the melodic phrase of the Psalm.<sup>5</sup> It sprang forth from the experience of an *oppressed* people. And it is intended to reach *oppressed* peoples. Not in order to make them *self confident!* By no means! *Release* is announced. The *end* of all self-certainty is proclaimed: that certainty in which the *Adamic I* is fascinated with its self and is thereby fixated exactly on its self. *To be fascinated* means *to be bound*. And whoever is bound by the self, will never be free from the self. He is his own prisoner: self-certain, but not free, and unable to trust another person.

Indeed, the self-certain I is not even able to trust itself. She who is her own prisoner is simultaneously always her own guard. And the guard trusts the prisoner just as little as the prisoner the guard. A fundamental lack of trust reigns between the two. And just as the self that is at once both self-binding and self-bound mistrusts itself, so the I fascinated with itself fundamentally mistrusts itself. For this reason self-certainty must come to an end if true trust is to begin. A person who trusts ceases to be self-fixated. A person who trusts ceases to be

fascinated with and bound to the self. In trust an I counts on another I. And there, in first trusting another, and not the self, one will find that necessary self trust, without which not one of us can exist.

Certainty without self-certainty, trust without self-doubt, safety in the face of the greatest danger – it is not so easy to recognize the melodic phrase of this old song. The Psalmist reaches far afield to bring before our eyes these elemental oppressors who pursue us. Three completely different scenarios are sketched out in weighty, long-rambling verses.

The origin of the world is recalled, but only in order to consider its imminent end: seas rage, mountains collapse and sink into the sea. Chaos ensues. The *tohuwabohu*<sup>6</sup> is evoked, which the Creator mastered at the earth's origin, and which seeks yet again to break into the good order of creation. And with our help! Landmines hidden in the earth, which suddenly explode, and with them, an innocent child – this is the *tohuwabohu* staged by us, which from its inception has no other end than to destroy created life from the inside out.

Then the scene changes. An assault is called to mind, the assault of nations upon the city of God – in vain until now, it is true, but extraordinarily oppressive all the same. Like the waters of the primal flood, the hostile powers surge in proximity. Like chaotic floods, they threaten to wash away and to breach the walls of the city built high. And where the walls fall, so too falls the city, since, in the ancient world, the political commonwealth itself hangs in the balance with the city walls. When a conquered city lost its independence, the inhabitants would become enslaved, and the freedom of the *polis* - political freedom – would be demolished. It is no longer merely destruction of created life, generally speaking, which is invoked in this scene, but the destruction of *human life-together*.<sup>7</sup>

And finally – in an especially harsh scene – the divine wrath and *its* destroying activity come into view. It is certainly not taken to be destructive of life and life-together nor of the freedom of this life and life-together, as it is with the powers of chaos. The destructive activity of the divine wrath is levelled, instead, at the powers of destruction themselves. It wards off war, breaks the bow, shatters the spear, it consumes chariots of war with fire. The particular goal of this anger, then, is the reign of freedom and peace in which life is no longer oppressed, let alone destroyed. *God's* anger is never an end in itself. God is no tyrant who arbitrarily bursts forth in anger and then

delights in his own outburst of anger. Instead, *God's* anger makes free the way of grace. *God's* anger is always a *freeing* anger. The narration in the third scenario of our Psalm speaks of this.

Three scenarios shift in swift sequence: powers of chaos contrary to creation, a narrated rebellion of the peoples against the city of God, and the liberating wrath of God. Yet these three cohere with the melodic phrase, which is exactly what this Psalm has, like nearly every successful song.

In a successful song, such a melody permeates every strophe, every word, every syllable and thereby allows the most diverse pictures, motifs, and scenes to become, above all else, a whole – a harmonious whole. Indeed such a melodic phrase aims to hold together much more than the song alone. The melody has attained its goal when it transcends those who sing, or merely hum, or even only hear, the song. The melodic phrase of a song first attains its goal then, when it also permeates *our life* and allows *our* so often *dissipated*, possibly even *torn existence* to become a whole, to become a harmonized whole, even if only for a blink of the eye. Perhaps then:

“Softly singing measures wing  
sweetly through my mind ...”<sup>8</sup>

Or perhaps:

“Filling wood and vale you cast  
Quiet misty sheen,  
And for once release at last  
All my soul serene;”<sup>9</sup>

*Softly singing measures wing sweetly through my mind? And for once release at last all my soul serene?* Ah, that must be wonderful. Instead we have become suspicious of all too lyrical melodies such as these, which threaten to overpower us with their beauty full of promise. Those *other* songs, with their hard dissonance, have a greater chance of conveying their shrill melody to our lives. Indeed,

“There are some songs and hit tunes  
With a certain rhythm and rime,  
They get to your gizzard too soon  
And you’re out on the floor till nine.”<sup>10</sup>

The 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm seems to belong to this sort of song. Its ground only becomes recognizable through its thoroughly oppressive

dissonance. And this dissonance does not get to our gizzard *for only a couple of hours*.

*And you're out on the floor till nine?* In our Psalm the floor itself begins to stagger! The firm ground on which we build, threatens to give way. The sea, otherwise a likeness of the smoothly flowing life which is "smooth and ever-clear and crystal bright,"<sup>11</sup> this sea rages and storms. The mountains, otherwise lofty metaphors for that which endures and for unshakeable certainty, these mountains collapse upon themselves. Here, there is no longer any foundation under the foot. Here, there is no solid ground on which to stand, let alone to which to flee: no stability and most certainly no progress! Chasms crack open.

"And suffering men  
Dwindle and fall  
Blindly from one  
Hour to the next,  
Hurled like water  
From rock to rock,  
Downwards for years to uncertainty."<sup>12</sup>

Without foothold, without ground, without foundation. Such, indeed, are we, brothers and sisters. And it is all the more true of those who are self certain. The more they seek a base in themselves, the more baseless they become. The more intensively they seek to ground their existence in themselves, the more they become destitute of any ground whatsoever.

And above all, this also holds true for that community which is all too self certain, which is fixated upon itself and so becomes its own prisoner. Whether it be a youthful clique, which, fascinated anew with itself each morning, is bound by itself; or whether it be the community of some church as a whole, which, in its unadulterated preoccupation with itself, threatens to forget not only the godless world but even more so, in the end, the loving God; or whether it be a political commonwealth, which, at the expense of the other, wills to be strong and ruthless and seeks to carry through its – and only its – interests. Even in *community*, we are threatened with losing hold, with forfeiting the basis of our community, with losing the common ground under our feet; with losing any and all hold, basis, and ground. And yet, "there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God."<sup>13</sup> How so? How might this contrast be understood?

Is it *outside* the walls of the city that destruction lies in wait, while *within* the walls life is lived light-heartedly? Is the reference to the elation of despair? In the evil times of the plague this was well known: a final, despairing lust for life often broke out alongside the epidemic. Is it, then, a last dance, a dance on the volcano's edge? Wantonness in the face of death?

Or – perhaps a little arrogantly – an idyllic nation state is being sung of here; the guarded city as the world set over against the ravages of war which rage outside the walls? Does the text speak of the cultivation of an urban idyll: a kind of defiant reaction to a world bent on self-destruction? “Rage, O world, thy noises, Cannot drown our voices”?<sup>14</sup> And do wells and springs babble to this rhythm? Luther's rather free translation, which better paints before our eyes the life of a medieval city, with its wells and springs, could suggest such thoughts.

Yet, even if we allow ourselves to speak of the original text itself, the harsh contrast between what happens outside and what happens within the inner life of the city remains. Neither wells nor springs, but refreshing trickles of water delight the encircled city in the Hebrew original: trickles of water, which flow through the city in various ways and please the inhabitants. One must not liken it to a night in Venice. Forget too, about the Neckar and Ammer rivers that flow through the university city of Tübingen, in which I am at home. Or Basel, fed by the ever flowing Rhine.

Our song sings neither of Venice, nor of Tübingen, nor of Basel. Our song sings of Jerusalem. But Jerusalem, the city built high, has no stream, has no river whose tributaries flow through it. And the brook which it has, the Kidron Brook, flows, when it actually flows, outside of the walls, deep below in the valley, where it traverses the Mount of Olives. Obviously the psalmist sings of a totally other Jerusalem: a Jerusalem, which in truth deserves to be called the city of God.

So, then, he is not thinking of a normal river at all. Rather, he thinks of the marvellous streams which have already watered Paradise and which wash about the place of the divine according to primordial mythic knowledge: primordial waters, which, replenished from above, rise up in order to please the deity and with it, the city of God as well. These waters do not merely refresh the thirsty. With them, fruitfulness flows upon an otherwise arid land. These are welling springs of life, which ebb out of the cultural wasteland: streams of blessing, from which we live!

Yet, of what use is all of this fruitfulness if the life that blossoms remains *defenceless*? Surely little children need more than a guardian angel if their tender life is not to bloom for all-too-short a time; if it is to increase and prosper despite the dangers that threaten. And when we are adults, we are even more dependent upon being wondrously sheltered by benevolent powers.

The Psalmist therefore links the picture of the city rich in water with the picture of the impregnable city, which furnishes refuge. No power of the world can master it. No-one is able to intrude forcefully into this city. Its gates open up only from within. But they really do this: they actually open. Not for the self centred, however, not for lordly masters of cities who do not think that they can live without slaves. On the contrary, the doors of this city open up for slaves pursued by masters, and for all who need support and a strong ground and foundation under their feet.

For those wishing only to intrude forcefully, however, this fortress becomes an impregnable citadel. Yet, to the one who knows the password which opens the door of this fortress, to the one who is accordingly admitted, to that person, the impregnable citadel becomes a place of freedom. Whatever enslaves us falls away from us there. And these are not only external powers and authorities. We can also be enslaved by coercions ruling within us. *What* tyrannizes us in one instance, *who* enslaves us in another – each person may work that out on their own. Only let it be known that the powers and authorities which tyrannize us from the outside only correspond all too often to an inner readiness for subjection – indeed, an inner readiness for slavish duty.

Yet all of this falls away of itself entirely from the one who has arrived at the place of salvation. In this fortress we are not only loosed from those powers which pursue and enslave us. Here one person's very self is freed and another person is set free from her own self. In this way, we are truly free: free from the self and thereby free to begin something now with the self, to begin something meaningful. And free to begin something with the man on the right and the woman on the left. In this fortress one becomes a proper beginner and so a truly free person, because *freedom is* – according to a definition of Immanuel Kant, auspicious even from a theological perspective – “*the faculty of beginning a state from itself*.”<sup>15</sup>

Need we still expressly state that God, and God alone, is such a mighty fortress and exactly for that reason a fortress promising freedom? Now, the “password,” which moves the door, *no the heart of God*, to be opened from the inside – this key word is *trust*, is *faith*. The person who trusts in God is already with God. After all, we travel by faith, by trusting in God. So said Luther – in language so difficult to surpass in pith and beauty. By faith we travel well beyond ourselves and into God.

The 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm intends to encourage us in exactly this way: so that by believing we travel beyond ourselves; so that by believing we are carried away by God and to God; so that by believing in the One beyond ourselves we are caught up in the glorious ecstasy of freedom. And when we sing, brothers and sisters, when we raise our hearts to God in singing, then this is at least a beginning, a little beginning of a great freedom.

And so we want, now, to sing this Old Testament song of trust in Luther’s fashion: not *against* some person, but as an expression of our *trust in God*. And we want to do it this way, as though we were singing this chorale for the first time, as though we were to be accompanied by a single lute, and not by a brass section: cautiously then, tenderly and heartfelt – precisely like *a real beginner*.

## Notes

- 1 Preached in the Münster of Basel, Switzerland, May 10, 1998. This sermon was first published as “Predigt über Psalm 46” in *Vergegenwärtigung des Alten Testaments. Beiträge zur biblischen Hermeneutik. Festschrift für Rudolf Smend zum 70. Geburtstag*. hg. von Chr. Bultmann u.a. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2002), 465-472. It appears here with the permission of the author and Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht in a translation by Allen G. Jorgenson, Pastor, St. James Ev. Lutheran Church, Mannheim, Ontario. Thanks to Drs. Philip G. Ziegler and Hans-Peter Großhans for their assistance in assuring the accuracy of the translation.
- 2 “Liebe Gemeinde” will be translated as “brothers and sisters.”
- 3 “Die großen Nöte, die uns getroffen haben.” (Psalm 46:1)
- 4 “... dieses Vertrauen sei alles andere als blauäugig ...”
- 5 “... wenn man nach der Grundmelodie des Psalms fragt.” Cf. Willi Apel, *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard

University Press, 1951), p. 311 who defines the “ground” of a song as a “short melodic phrase (normally from four to eight measures) which is repeated over and over again as a bass line, with varying superstructures (melodies, harmonies) added each time in the upper parts.”

6 Cf. Genesis 1:2.

7 “... menschlichen Zusammenlebens ...”

8 “Leise zieht durch mein Gemüt, liebliches Geläute ...” from “Neuer Frühling, 6” in *Heinrich Heine: Werke und Briefe in zehn Bänden, Volume 1*, edited by Hans Kaufmann, 2nd Ed. (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau, 1972), pp. 217-218. ET *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine: A Modern English Version* by Hal Draper (Cambridge, MA: Suhrkamp/Insel Publishers, 1982), p. 316.

9 “Füllest wieder Busch und Tal Still mit Nebelganz, / Lösest endlich auch einmal / Meine Seele ganz;” from “An den Mond.” The English and German text can be found in J.W. v. Goethe, *Selected Poems*, translated by John Whaley (London: J.M. Dent, 1998), pp. 54, 55.

10 “Es gibt Melodien und Lieder, die bestimmte Rhythmen betreuen, / die schlagen Dein Inneres nieder, / und Du bist am Boden bis neun.” From “Destille.” The German and English text can be found in Gottfried Benn, *Ausgewählte Gedichte*, edited by G. Haffmans, translated by Robert M. Browning (Zurich: Diogenes, 1973), p. 72.

11 “Ewigklar und spiegelrein und eben,” from “Das Ideal und das Leben” in Friedrich Schiller, *Sämtliche Werke: Band 1*, edited by Gerhard Fricke, Herbert G. Göpfert and Herbert Stubenrauch (München: Hanser, 1962), p. 201. ET *Poems of Schiller*, translated by Edgar A. Browning (New York: Hurst and Co, 1851), p. 186.

12 “Es schwinden, es fallen Die leidenden Menschen / Blindlings von einer / Stunde zur andern, / Wie Wasser von Klippe / Zu Klippe geworfen, / Jahr lang ins Ungewisse hinab.” From “Hyperions Schicksalslied.” Both the English and German texts are found in Friedrich Hölderlin, *Holderlin*, translated by Michael Hamburger (London: The Harvill Press, 1942), pp. 112, 113.

13 Psalm 46:4. The German text has “Und dennoch soll die Stadt Gottes fein lustig bleiben mit ihren Brunnlein.”

14 “Tobe, Welt, und springe; ich steh hier und singe.” From Johann Franck’s “Jesu, meine Freude.” Both texts are found in J.S. Andrews, *A Study of German Hymns in Current English Hymnals* (Berne and Frankfurt/M: Peter Lang, 1981), pp. 278-281.

- <sup>15</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Sämtliche Werke, Erster Band: Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, edited by Raymund Schmidt (Leipzig, Felix Meiner, 1926), p. 523: “das Vermögen, einen Zustand von selbst anzufangen.” ET *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 533.