

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble!
Psalm 46

Happy Halloween!

Today is Reformation Sunday. It is also Halloween, which is a scary, sweet and fun day. I assume many of you have prepared candy for kids who will knock on your door and say, “Trick or treat!” The kids will laugh as their bags fill up with sweet candy and chocolate. Right? I always wonder if kids eat all that candy they got? Do they eat it all? Whether they eat it all or not, I am sure that they remember Halloween as a fun and sweet day. However, originally Halloween was not a fun day. Halloween’s origins relate to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced sow-in). The Celts believed that the ghosts of the dead returned to earth on the night of October 31. To avoid harm from evil spirits, people disguised themselves as animals or ghosts. They might have enjoyed the festivities but at the same time, they also feared the spirits of the dead. Nowadays, Halloween has become one of America’s favorite holidays. Young children like it because they get candy. Young adults like it because they have wild parties in silly costumes. But some say, “Halloween has survived because it allows us to engage with our fears — our fear of death, of the dark of winter, of the unknown — in the same space that encourages wild joy. It transforms the things that we dread the most into a celebration where we can embrace the things we don’t understand.”¹ Perhaps, Halloween has been a cultural way to deal with the fear of death and the unknown. There are different ways of dealing with fear.

A Courage Training at Tomb Yard

Have you ever been in a graveyard alone in the middle of the night? I have done it several times when I was a kid and it was not very pleasant. My father sent me to a martial arts training center for many years and one of the trainings was courage training at a tomb yard. Once a year, we gathered at the training center at sunset and went to a remote graveyard. In the United States, graveyards are normally located within a town or near a church. However, in Korea, grave sites are generally in the mountains and graves looks like this. Scary huh? [ppt]

When it turned completely dark, one by one, we were sent to find a flag at the center of the graveyard. I can tell you it wasn’t as exciting as an Easter egg hunt. I was six years old when I first participated in this courage training. Do you know what happened? I was so scared so I cried when my turn came. Eventually, the director of the training center sent me with my brother... who was seven years old. Both of us held each other’s hand as we walked in the dark graveyard. I was scared because I felt as though a ghost would come up out of a grave at any moment. But eventually my brother and I made it through. I don’t think this courage training made me courageous, but it helped me to understand that darkness is just darkness and nothing to fear.

Humans are way scarier than ghosts

As I grew up, I began to feel that humans were way scarier than ghosts. I haven’t heard any news of ghosts killing humans but I hear news of homicides every day. Gun violence, school shootings, robberies and the church shootings. I believe some of you have heard about what happened at our neighbor church, Open Table of Christ. Last Sunday after the worship service, church members discovered that a bullet had pierced one of the building’s windows. Police found that several rounds had hit the church building. They don’t know when it happened, and

¹ <https://www.mvorganizing.org/why-do-we-love-halloween/>

they are grateful that this shooting didn't happen during their worship service. The church is no longer a safe place from gun violence. The rise of violence in Providence is concerning. Rampant violence, terrorism and wars in the world are troubling for us. A ghost doesn't kill people but people kill people. Humans are way scarier than ghosts. Fear of ghost, fear of crazy people, fear of an unknown future, fear of economic collapse, fear of immigrants, ...the list goes on and on. Some politicians fan the flames of xenophobia. "Illegal immigrants are crossing the border. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. It's only getting worse. You walk down the street, you get shot." They stimulate people's fear of death, destruction, violence, poverty, weakness and they promise that "I alone can fix it."

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But my friends, don't be fooled by politicians. Don't get fooled by anyone who promises ultimate security. Listen to the Psalmist's praise.

"1 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; 3 though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult." Amen!

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble!" These may be the most comforting and encouraging words in the Bible. Psalm 46 is called a "song of holy confidence." Confidence in God!

Imagine that somehow you have become a whistleblower and your actions have created a huge controversy in society. Some enthusiastically support you while some publicly denounce you as a traitor and even threaten your life. You are summoned to the Senate and don't know how it will turn out. The meeting will start in an hour. How would you feel? Anxious, troubled, fearful, distressed.

This hypothetical situation could be a modern version of Martin Luther's situation when he sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." A Mighty Fortress Is Our God is his momentous paraphrase of the first verses of Psalm 46. According to Heinrich Heine, Luther and his companions sang this song as they entered the city, Worms on April 16, 1521. He was summoned by the emperor in order to renounce or reaffirm his Ninety-five Theses. He could be condemned and executed. At that critical moment, he remembered that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble!" so he sang "a mighty fortress is our God" as he entered the city and he didn't fear confessing his faith that opened up the waves of reformation.

A way to move beyond fear is faith

Courage training does not make us brave. Staying in a graveyard at night doesn't make us courageous. So don't try it! What overcomes fear is faith in God. It's the confidence in God, the Almighty, who is our refuge! Those who have confidence in God can stand against violence and evil and overcome them with love.

In his interview, Rev. Sunmin Cho, the pastor at Open Table of Christ UMC, said, "he hopes Providence residents will come together to put an end to the ongoing violence that's plaguing the city." "No matter how strong the violence or how rampant it is, we raise our voices stronger and more loudly," he said.² God is our refuge and therefore we will not fear and will continue to work for peace and justice in the world. Because "the Lord of hosts is with us and God is our refuge, we fear no evil.

² <https://www.wpri.com/news/local-news/providence/gunshots-fired-into-providence-church/>

Let me share a picture. This is a reconciliation cross. It looks like two people hugging each other. I shared the picture of this cross a few year ago, some of you bought them. However, this cross is more special because this cross was made from the wood of rifle stocks. A peace activist collected rifle stocks and asked Rev. Kim, a carpenter, to make the crosses. Guns seem to promise security for us but in essence, a gun is made to take life efficiently. It symbolizes destruction, war, domination, hatred and death. But God is our refuge and strength, not guns! With confidence in God, our job is to witness to people. "Come, behold the works of the Lord; He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire." We raise our voices of peace and reconciliation.

What are you afraid of? Name it and say, "God is our refuge and therefore we will not fear!" Are you afraid of natural disasters? God is our refuge! Are you afraid of political calamities? God is our refuge! Do you fear the violence of crime and economic collapse? God is our refuge! Do you fear death? "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear!" Remember "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." Amen.