

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

October 25, 2026

Be Still...

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

On this Reformation Sunday, Lutherans across the globe lift their voices to sing Martin Luther's iconic sixteenth-century hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. It is a song born straight out of the roaring cadence of Psalm 46. But if we are being honest with ourselves, we in the modern Western church have spent centuries domesticating this psalm. We take its most famous line, verse 10, "*Be still, and know that I am God,*" and we sanitize it. We turn it into a soft, cozy slogan printed on coffee mugs or we treat it as an invitation to take a quiet afternoon nap or step away from a busy calendar.

But look at where that verse actually stands in the Hebrew Bible! Look at the landscape surrounding it in Psalm 46! The earth is shaking. The mountains are quaking and slipping into the heart of the sea. The waters are raging and foaming. Nations are in an uproar, kingdoms are tottering, and war is consuming the horizon. This is not a peaceful garden scene; it is a world in apocalyptic upheaval. Perhaps that sounds a little too familiar. But if it does...have faith!

Have faith because right in the middle of that geopolitical frenzy, God speaks. In Hebrew, that command translated as "Be still" is the verb רָפוּא (raphu), coming from the root *raphah*. It does not mean "relax" or "take a deep breath." It is a sharp, imperative military command that literally translates to: "Unclench your hands! Slacken your grip! Put down your weapons! Cease your frantic striving!" God looks at a world intoxicated by fear, arming itself to the teeth, and scrambling for control, and God shouts, *Drop your hands!*

This is the radical heart of the Reformation. Reformation is not polite quietude. It is not religious self-polishing, nor is it an administrative update to institutional rules. Reformation is the divine disarming of our personal, cultural, and imperial weapons

of self-defense. It is the moment when we stop trying to justify ourselves, stop frantically striving to earn our own survival, and surrender our clenched fists to enter the true, unearned refuge of God's grace.

To understand why God commands us to drop our weapons, we have to look at the world we inhabit. We don't have to look far to see that human civilization remains hopelessly addicted to the logic of the sword. In our daily news feeds, we see skyrocketing global military budgets, the rapid development of autonomous weapon systems, and an escalating geopolitical arms race. Empires ancient and modern operate under a single, fundamental myth, that safety is achieved through superior firepower, that security is built by sharpening our spears, and that peace is maintained by holding the power to annihilate our neighbors.

Under our current systems, human bodies, environments and watersheds, even entire nations are subjected to commodification, the soul-crushing process of reducing sacred human beings and God's good creation to targets, defense assets, labor metrics, or disposable collateral. We convince ourselves that if we just build a higher wall, deploy a deadlier missile, or hoard a larger stockpile, we will finally be safe.

But look at how Paul diagnoses this same human impulse in Romans 3. Paul demonstrates that human beings do not just participate in physical arms races; we build theological and moral arms races as well! We construct elaborate weapons of self-justification. We use the "works of the law," legalistic scorecards, religious performance, and moral superiority as defensive armor to protect our egos and prove that we are better, cleaner, or more worthy than those outside our walls. We carry around the spears of judgment and the heavy shields of cynicism because we are terrified of being vulnerable.

Yet hear what the Psalmist proclaims in Psalm 46:9 about God's response to our human armories, God "makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire." Notice what God does and doesn't do! God does not bless our arms races or take sides in our imperial competitions. Instead, God disarms us! God shatters the very weapons we rely on for self-defense, burning our protective armor in the fire of divine truth, because God knows that those weapons do not protect us, they imprison us.

When God shatters our weapons of moral performance and breaks our bows of self-reliance, what is left standing? Paul gives us the answer in Romans 3:21–24, declaring the foundational proclamation of the Gospel, “But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Where, then, is boasting? Paul asks in verse 27. It is excluded! It is rendered completely absurd. As theologians of the cross, we call things what they are; and when it comes to our relationship with God, we bring absolutely nothing to the table. As I have reminded you before, when it comes to our salvation, everything we think we bring doesn’t amount to a hill of beans! We have nothing to boast about! We are beggars before God. Everything we have, our breath, our life, our forgiveness, our liberation, comes to us as pure, unearned gift.

In John 8, Jesus speaks to those who are struggling with his teachings, promising that “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” But notice how the crowd immediately gets defensive! They hold up their ancestral pedigree, boasting, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone!” Hear their defensiveness! They are standing in front of the Living Word, gripping the weapons of their religious status, denying their own captivity. But Jesus unmask their delusion, replying, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”

Slavery to sin is not just a list of bad choices; it is the addiction to ego and self-defense. When our egos are in the driver’s seat, we treat life as a zero-sum competition. We stay trapped in closed circles of violence, where our fear justifies our defensiveness, and our defensiveness reinforces our isolation.

Jesus breaks that closed circle not by wielding a bigger sword, but by becoming the disarmed Messiah. On the cross, Jesus does not conquer Caesar by calling down twelve legions of angels. Jesus disarms the principalities and powers by taking on human limitation, absorbing the violence of the state without returning it, and stretching his arms wide in self-giving love. On the cross, God proves once and for all that “power-with” and radical vulnerability are infinitely stronger than imperial coercion.

This brings us to the hard, beautiful work of discipleship. If God's grace is a free gift, and if Christ has already disarmed the powers of death, why do we keep picking our weapons back up? Why do we return, again and again, to our heavy armor?

It comes down to our need for mirror-work. Self-reflection is essential to walking the Way of Christ because it is how we become righteous, how we learn to be who we were created to be. When we look into the mirror of God's Word, under the compassionate, loving gaze of Christ, we are invited to ask: What weapons am I still holding onto? Where am I gripping the spear of defensiveness in my relationships? Where am I hiding behind the shield of moral superiority or cynicism to keep from being hurt?

Let's practice this disarming right here, right now. As usual, start by taking a deep breath. Wherever you are sitting in your pew, pull your hands into two clenched fists. Feel the tension in your forearms, your fingers, and your knuckles. Bring to mind one specific "weapon" you have been holding tightly this week. Maybe it is the weapon of needing to win an argument at home or work. Maybe it is the spear of judgment against someone who thinks differently than you. Maybe it is the heavy shield of anxiety, where you feel you must control every outcome because you don't trust anyone else. Feel how exhausting it is to carry that weapon day after day.

Now, take a slow, deep breath, and as you exhale unclench your hands and turn them facing up. Now, listen to the voice of God echo over the noise of the world, *Raphu*. Drop your hands. Put down the spear. Slacken your grip. You do not have to save yourself. I am your refuge, not your weapons. Feel the lightness in your hands when you unclench them and simply receive the gift of grace.

My siblings in Christ, when we open our hands, we discover the promise of Jeremiah 31. God does not write the covenant on cold, rigid stone tablets that require armed guards to enforce. God writes the covenant directly upon our hearts! "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people... for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

When the law of love is written on your heart, you no longer need the weapons of self-defense. You don't need to compete for status in the Empire's meritocracy. You don't need to participate in the culture war's arms race. You can step out into the world unarmed, because your refuge is not in your strength, but in the God who accompanies you. As Psalm 46 proclaims, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be shaken; God shall help it at the break of day."

Reformation is not a historical event frozen in 1517. Reformation is an ongoing, daily practice of unclenching our fists, dropping our weapons, and letting God be God.

So go out into the world this week with open hands. Refuse to mime the rage and fear of this age. Share your bread with the hungry, stand as a shield for the vulnerable, unbind those who are trapped in shame, and rest in the unshakable fortress of God's unearned grace. Go be human, be humanity, be righteous, be who God created you to be. Amen.