

# Notes from the Music Director (No. 15)

Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Rochester, Pennsylvania

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October 25, 2015—Reformation Sunday



Painting of 45-year-old Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach (1528).

Today is Reformation Sunday (the last Sunday in October), which commemorates the momentous event of Martin Luther posting “The 95 Theses”—a disputation on the power and efficacy of indulgences—on the front door of the Roman Catholic Church of *Schlosskirche* (castle church) of Wittenberg on October 31, 1517.

Martin Luther (1483-1546), an Augustinian friar, priest, theologian and professor, strongly disputed the Church’s claim of the time that freedom from God’s punishment for sin could be purchased with money. The posting of “The 95 Theses” is widely regarded

historically as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Luther was excommunicated by Pope Leo X four years later in 1521.

At Grace Lutheran we celebrate in music Reformation Sunday (498 years after the posting of “The 95 Theses” in Wittenberg) with two hymns with text and music by Martin Luther: (1) the ever-popular *Ein feste Burg* (A Mighty Fortress Is Our God), and (2) *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir* (Out of the Depths I Cry to You).

Luther was a prolific hymn writer and wrote about forty hymns, of which his energetic *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* is arguably the best-known and most-loved of all Protestant hymns. Luther wrote the words and composed the melody sometime between 1527 and 1529. It has been translated into English at least seventy times and also into many other languages. The words of the hymn—which became known as “The Battle Hymn of the Reformation”—are paraphrased from Psalm 46.



Handwritten copy of "Ein feste Burg" with Luther's signature.

Many composers have used Luther's tune in organ preludes, cantatas, symphonies, operas, piano pieces and film scores, such as: Dieterich Buxtehude, J. S. Bach, Johann Pachelbel, Felix Mendelssohn, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Richard Wagner, Max Reger, Claude Debussy, and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Martin Luther's tune has also infiltrated pop culture, appearing on the animated television sitcom *The Simpsons*, and the fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*.

*Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir* is a meditative paraphrase of Psalm 130 which was first published in 1524 as one of eight songs in the first Lutheran hymnal, the *Achtliederbuch*. This hymn was one of Luther's first attempts to make the psalms accessible to German-speaking worshippers in Protestant churches.

To hear Martin Luther's *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* (LBW 229) with chorus, organ, brass and timpani, go to <https://youtu.be/wiRpUtVByxU>. A special treat for listeners during this

performance is verse three which is sung with the lively isometric variant of the tune (LBW 228).

## **Resources**

Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (Zonderfan: 1989)

LBW: Lutheran Book of Worship (Augsburg Publishing House: 1978)

WOV: With One Voice (Augsburg Fortress: 1995)

W&P: Worship & Praise Songbook (Augsburg Fortress: 1999)

ELW: Evangelical Lutheran Worship (Augsburg Fortress: 2006)

Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org>

Hymnary.org: <http://www.hymnary.org>

GIA Publications: <http://www.giamusic.com>

Hymntime.com: <http://hymntime.com>

Singers.com: <http://singers.com>

Back to the index of "24 Essays on 24 Hymns":

[http://henrydoktorski.com/Music\\_Director\\_Notes.html](http://henrydoktorski.com/Music_Director_Notes.html).