

“FOR GOOD AND ILL”
Psalm 134; Matthew 16:13-20
August 21, 2011
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When I was at my church in Seattle, I had the privilege of facilitating a support group of World War II veterans. In those days, it was just assumed that returning war veterans would reintegrate into their former lives, that what they had seen and done and been a part of would just be compartmentalized and put away. These vets, most of them then in their late 60s and 70s, had never spoken of their war experiences since their return, and as they grew nearer the end of their lives, they needed a safe place to take their memories out of the box in which they had been so tightly bound, and seek some combination of understanding, closure, and forgiveness. I was astounded and deeply touched that they chose me to be their sounding board and witness. I learned more than I can say from their stories.

One man in my group, as he was speaking one day of his experience—bloody, brutal, living in a place that could move in seconds from extreme boredom to pure terror—he told us that one of the Navy chaplains had given him a small Bible, and he carried that Bible with him every day of his service. “It was my touchstone,” he told us, its solid presence a reminder that he was fighting for freedom and righteousness, and God was with him in the struggle. He confessed that there were days that only the weight of that book in his pocket kept him from turning, running, deserting. “Psalm 124,” he would tell us. “I memorized it. Some days, I would repeat it over and over again, a constant loop in my head, holding me fast.”

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side—let Israel now say—if it had not be the Lord who was one our side when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; then over us would have gone the raging waters. Blessed be the Lord who has not given us as prey to their teeth. We have escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

Every three years since, whenever this psalm has come up in the lectionary, I have considered preaching on it, then put it aside because, honestly, I have very mixed feeling about all of the texts in the Bible that claim God as our partner, God as the one who helps us, God as the one who gives us the victory. How many of you are similarly uncomfortable with such texts? I didn't think I was alone.

The problem with the concept of God on our side is that it can be used with equal conviction and sense of religious wholeness both for good and for ill. I have several friends in the recovery community: recovering alcoholics and other addicts. Without a sense of God's sustaining presence by their side, they believe they could never hold on to their sobriety. I have known so many others who wade through deep waters of sickness, or caregiving, of family struggle, facing the death of a child, coping with mental illness, or anger, or betrayal, the struggle for justice, or the brutality and chaos of war or disaster—and for all of these people, their faith that God was with them, that God was at their right hand, their refuge and their strength: for them, that faith

has made the difference between making it safely to a new shore or drowning in whatever beset them.

We, who claim a loving, sustaining God: how can we not turn to God in distress? What a gift it can be to have a faith that sustains us in good times and bad, a God who is there for us in the darkness, and, despite our imperfections, will not let us go.

When I think of the early days of the kingdom of Israel under David and Solomon, the time when most of the Psalms were written, I think of little Israel, surrounded by larger, more powerful neighbors, all of whom wanted Israel for no reason other than the trade routes that went right through it. I can see how precarious the people's life seemed, and how they hoped, they prayed, they trusted in God to help them maintain a safe haven.

We can see some of the same impetus at work in Israel today: modern day Israel, a state founded by refugees from the Holocaust, refugees that no one would take, people from around the world who had fled their homelands, often with nothing more than the clothes on their backs, holding fiercely to their small state—about the size as the Willamette Valley—as their God-given, God-protected asylum. I am the daughter of a Jewish man of that era, all of whose family in Germany was annihilated. The Holocaust caused my father to lose all faith in any kind of God, but he believed to his death in the state of Israel. And I bring up the problem of modern day Israel deliberately, because I understand from my gut the Zionist impulse, the fierceness of Israel's claim on its land. And I also understand the anger and pain of the Palestinians: displaced, their freedoms limited, strangers in their own land. And, to get back to the topic immediately at hand, I know how many on both sides of this terrible conflict see God on their side and only their side—and not to good effect.

To be the special people of God doing God's work with God as their helpmeet is claimed by so many groups and individuals of different religions over the span of centuries for so many crusades, campaigns, wars, and other actions that in the actors' minds are holy and sacred. "God on our side" has given us hospitals and orphanages, food for the hungry and educational institutions. It has also given us inquisitions, witch hunts, the Crusades of old, and modern day suicide bombers who don their vests, board their aircraft, drive their trucks into non-combatants believing absolutely, sincerely, that God is on their side. The United States has carried out everything from the Revolutionary War to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, using the rhetoric of the United States as the New Israel with God on our side. Those who kidnap gay and lesbian youth and force them in the "scared straight" boot camps believe they have God on their side. You see the problem. You know the problem. I hope, like me, that you struggle with the problem.

There are two things I clearly believe when I think about the affirmation that God is on my side or our side. First, the minute any person or group of people assume that they are more God's people than anyone else is, and that therefore, whatever action they take is supported by God, then what they/we have done is no less than to upend the order of creation. Instead of seeing ourselves as being created in God's image, we have instead recreated God in our image. We have put God in a box much too small, and that is misguided at best. To paraphrase the writer Ann

Lamott, "The minute we believe that God believes all the things we believe and hates all the people and things that we hate, we know that we are wrong."

Second, I know that every person on this earth is one of God's beloved ones. That's not a simple concept to wrap our heads around. The people we deplore, the people we think are evil, those who wish us harm, all the people who live half way around the world whose lives we can't even imagine: all of them are as precious to God as we are, all of them. That includes Adolf Hitler, Ted Bundy, and Osama bin Laden. It's another huge reminder of God's otherness from us. God does not have a favorite child, or a favorite religious group, or a favorite nation. Whose side is God on? We live in our relatively small boxes, mired always to some extent in our own self-interest. God has no box. God is on the side of God's entire creation. God does not care about weighing oil interests against political interests. God does not favor the United States' interests over Chad's interests. God does not favor Christians over Muslims, or Jews over Hindus, or any group over any other group. That is so hard for us to understand in any way that is concrete, in any way that gives shape to our lives. We can't imagine all the people of the world. God can. We can only barely see both the extreme commonalities and the extreme differences between our lives and other people's lives. That is not God's problem. We have only hints and guesses as to the vastness to God's love, God's ability to be with, and so we are always unconsciously breaking down it into something into something smaller that makes sense to us.

So where does that leave us? When it comes to the question of God with us on an individual, personal basis: God as our rock and refuge as we negotiate the storms and challenges of our lives, I wish for everyone who earnestly seeks that presence that they might find it. But when it comes to a sense that God is on our side....meaning that God is not on someone else's side, I would urge caution. Extreme caution. For about that I have more questions than answers. What would it mean for us to define justice as being equally just for every party involved? What would it mean for us to define difficulty or prosperity not out of our own self-interest, but out of a broader sense of a global interest? We talk about the world becoming smaller, about economies and human sustainability becoming ever more inter-connected, but how often do we actually think that way? If we think about God with us, and God with the people of Haiti, and Egypt, and Japan, and Turkey, and Thailand and Afghanistan: will that change our behaviors, change our priorities, change how we frame and resolve conflict, change us into God's people before any other identifier? It's a daunting task: to envision God's world and our place in it differently. But we can be sure as we try, that God will be on our side, on all of God's people's side. Thanks be to God. Amen.

