

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost
Year A, RCL
August 23, 2020
North Fork Ministries

Psalm 124 Page 781, BCP

1

If the LORD had not been on our side, *
let Israel now say;

2

If the LORD had not been on our side, *
when enemies rose up against us;

3

Then would they have swallowed us up alive *
in their fierce anger toward us;

4

Then would the waters have overwhelmed us *
and the torrent gone over us;

5

Then would the raging waters *
have gone right over us.

6

Blessed be the LORD! *
he has not given us over to be a prey for their teeth.

7

We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler; *
the snare is broken, and we have escaped.

8

Our help is in the Name of the LORD, *
the maker of heaven and earth.

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I don't often preach the Psalms. Neither do most preachers. Mostly, I think, because the Psalms typically lack an obvious narrative, a memorable story to hang the lesson on. Psalm 24 has the hint of a story, or at least one we can imagine. It appears to have been written during a time when the people of Israel had managed to avoid a great calamity,

“If the LORD had not been on our side...”, the people of Israel sighed. Their breathless recognition of God's faithfulness occurred after their narrow escape from near certain disaster. The people had emerged, perhaps not unscathed, but still intact, from a battle that would have meant their ruin – had the Lord not been on their side.

This is known as a psalm of Ascent - perhaps a song that the people sang while on pilgrimage, maybe returning from battle. But it also served a liturgical function, taking on the pattern of call and response still used in our worship. The first line of the psalm, “If the Lord had not been on our side,” is followed by a directive, “Let Israel now say,” And then the people would respond, “If the LORD had not been on our side, when enemies

rose up against us; Then would they have swallowed us up alive...

The people were singing together a song of thankfulness – thankful that with the Lord at their side, they had not been swallowed alive, overwhelmed by raging waters, or fallen prey to the enemy’s sharp teeth. “If the Lord had not been on our side.”

Yet there can be horrific consequences when the religious people of the world lay claim to a unique alliance with God. When the people of the modern day nation of Israel, justify occupation and economic oppression of their Palestinian neighbors with the claim that God is on their side, it must cause God to wince. When the people of Gaza, in self-proclaimed alliance with God, launch crude rockets across the border at their Israeli cousins, God must tremble. When Sunni and Shiites, in Syria and Iraq, seek to destroy one another, each claiming that God is on their side, it must cause God to shake his head in dismay. And when our own government can label other nations as part of an evil empire, and imagine that we are on the side of God when we invade foreign lands and unleash the destructive forces of our military might, I think that God weeps.

You have probably heard the story from the opening days of the civil war, when a pious minister told a deeply troubled President Lincoln that he "hoped the Lord is on our side." The president responded, "I am not at all concerned about that.... But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side."

If we can emulate Lincoln and put aside the problematic assumption that God is on our side and instead strive to be on the side of God, what side might that be? Contending forces, with widely divergent objectives and methods, constantly lay claim to being on the side of God.

What does it look like when you are on God’s side? Throughout the Old Testament, over and over again, are accounts of God acting on behalf of the oppressed and rescuing the poor from their bondage. The prophet Jeremiah praises the Lord because he “has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.” The prophet Ezekiel hears the Lord promise that he will rescue the lost sheep, “from all the places to which they have been scattered.” We worship a God who cares for those in need. If we are to be on the side of God, we too must be on the side of the sick, the needy, the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed.

This morning we heard St. Paul say in his letter to the Romans, “I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.” By the world’s standards most everyone here today is rich and powerful. If we wish to be on the side of God, we must align ourselves with those who are poor and powerless.

A few years ago I listened to an interview with Dr. Nahid Bhadelia, an infectious diseases expert at Boston University, who was going to Sierra Leone, Africa to help care for Ebola patients. Her journey into the heart of the terrible epidemic was an act of great courage. She was exposed to hardship of every kind and despite all precautions she might take, she ran the same risk of contracting the deadly disease, that confronted the physicians that

have already died and the Western aid workers who had prudently decided to leave. Even the freight carriers who would have transported the donated protective gear she planned to use, had ceased to fly into the infected area. Not once in the interview did I hear her claim that God was on her side in the battle, but I can't help but pray that God is at her side. And it is easy to imagine, that upon her safe return, a thankful community of faith might have proclaimed, "Had not God been on her side, enemies would have swallowed her up alive."

It was the same among courageous health care workers here on Long Island and in the city, who worked tirelessly to save the lives of the innocent and oppressed. They didn't boast that God was on their side. But they, and we, have the assurance, that those around our country currently engaged in the struggle to contain COVID 19, are on the side of the righteous.

Perhaps, as part of the world's wealthy, Psalm 24 can only be understood as a song of Thanksgiving - a recognition that, having passed through a difficult time, we too can offer thanksgiving that God is on our side, or at least...at our side.

Over the years there have been more than a few times in which, after narrowly avoiding certain disaster, I expressed the Psalmist's sentiment in a more Texas-like way, breathing a heavy sigh of relief and exclaiming, "Whew, I dodged that bullet". But from the vantage point of close to seven decades, I can tell you that there were more than a few bullets that I didn't successfully dodge." Was God less on my side then? I don't really know, but I am sure that through it all, God was at my side.

It's a sentiment similar to one I often hear more poetically expressed in another Texan's raspy, but still melodic voice - Willy Nelson singing,

"It's been rough and rocky travelin' , But I'm finally standin' upright on the ground .
After takin' several readings I'm surprised to find my mind's still fairly sound."

These are sentiments that many of us, who have known trying times, can relate to. They remind me of days when I'm not sure that I was always on God's side, but looking back I'm pretty certain that God was always by my side – otherwise, I would have been, swallowed up alive. It is a song of immense gratitude.

In the end, I'm not sure that we can know with any kind of certainty that we are acting on the side of God. It was only in retrospect that the Israelites sang their song, and it was a song of gratitude that they had persevered, and to their seeming surprise, prospered.

And so it is that we, echoing the thankful cry of the Israelites, can still proclaim, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth."