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9/30/18--University Presbyterian Church
Psalm 124; Ephesians 2:1-10

ON OUR SIDE

Can you remember this experience from childhood: standing in a line with your classmates while the team captains took turns picking players to be on their team? All the while you wondered whose side would you be on and whether you would be picked dead last, indicating that no one really wanted you on their team at all. From the time we are school aged, we became accustomed to choosing sides and rooting for our side to prevail against our opponents, even if those loyalties only lasted as long as a dodge ball game. Choosing sides continues as we grow older. These can take innocent forms: like what sports teams we back. I can recall asking my Dad when he was watching a sports event on TV whose side he was on, and then deciding that I too would back that team for no other reason than that was the side my Dad supported.

But of course, there is also the negative aspect that comes from choosing sides. When we choose sides in family arguments, or in office disputes, or in social policies, we may find ourselves mired in the complexities born from long histories of hurt and suspicion of the "other side." Divisions are created and deepened as we decide whose side we are on and whose side we are against.

This situation is played out with daily regularity in our nation at the moment as divisions are reinforced in the political and social arenas. Are you on the side of the Democrats or the Republicans, the Trump supporters or the Trump opponents, Judge Kavanaugh or Dr. Ford? The rhetoric as well as national policies from some of our leaders support an either/or dichotomy, that

the world comes down to *Us vs. Them*. And those who are not on our side, well they are the enemy, those who are to be opposed, those who are abhorrent to us.

As we choose our sides, we love nothing more than to find allies who will stand with us, who will join our side. We gravitate to those who share our opinions, who think like we think, live as we live, look like us, act like us, believe like us. And when it comes to having allies, there is no greater ally to have on your side than God Almighty. Knowing that God is on your side, well that brings a great boost of motivation and justification for you and your allies.

Throughout history, lots of people have claimed to have God on their side. And this belief has empowered peoples and nations to carry out all kinds of atrocities against those who they regarded as enemies or lesser people--to justify invasions and conquests, to justify colonization and massacres and theft of lands and property, to justify the mass enslavement of peoples, and murder. History has taught us to be very, very careful when people claim to have God on their side because of how this certainty has been used to harm others.

But that is exactly what our psalmist does today. The writer of our Psalm declares, "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side--let Israel now say--if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive."

Ah oh! Not one of those! Is that who our psalmist is--one of those people who believe God sides with them and against their enemies? Well, yes, that is quite likely. Within the scriptures we do find the belief among some of the writers that God favored them and their people over and above other people. And some of those atrocities we just mentioned were indeed perpetrated by those in biblical times who felt sure they enjoyed God's preferential favor.

Of course, when we read Psalm 124 carefully, it is clear that the writer was not talking being an invading or conquering force. Rather, we are given a picture of the writer and his or her

peoples as the ones being attacked. The writer and the writer's people are depicted as needing rescuing like birds from a cage and the enemy is portrayed as a powerful torrent of water, raging, engulfing, obliterating the people.

Who was this threatening enemy? Well, our writer is vague about specifics. And that is ok, because it allows us to find our own situations of peril within this psalm. We may think about the enemies we have known--those who oppose us, who were unjust to us, who may even have wished us harm. Or, we might imagine the enemy as some kind of hardship or threat to our lives: the cancer, the depression that endangered our wellbeing.

A deeper insight emerges as we contemplate the word for "enemy" that is used by the writer of Psalm 124. Psalm 124 states that "if had not been for the Lord who was on our side when our enemies attacked us . . ." The Hebrew translation actually reads "when our enemies rose up against us." And the word used here in Hebrew for "enemy" is the word *adam*. *Adam* means "the human one" and is the word used to name the first human being created in the story of Genesis. *Adam* is the enemy. It is used in this psalm and in other psalms as the collective noun to describe Israel's enemies. And it points to the fact that the enemy, the real enemy we face, is our humanness. *Adam* rose up against us--all those aspects of our humanness that lie in contrast to the ways of God: our hatred, prejudice, and intolerance. Our greed, selfishness, and bitterness. Our fears, our indifference, our violence. *Adam* rose up against us--the forces and ways and proclivities of our humanness. If it had not been for the Lord who was on our side, proclaims the psalmist, we would have been lost to these overwhelming and chaotic forces. We would have remained captured by the forces of our own misguided ways. For in the end, that is indeed what threatens all of us, that is the force that causes so much suffering and hurt and

wrong in our world by one person or one group toward another--these overwhelming and chaotic and uncontrolled forces that lie within the human heart and soul and mind.

But God *was* on our side, according to our psalmist. And God intervened and delivered us from *adam*, from the forces of our humanness, and set us free, like little birds from a cage, free to know and live a different kind of humanity.

That is the same message we are offered by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. We hear this same message of deliverance from our enemies but from a Christian perspective. In a similar way to the writer of Psalm 124, Paul speaks about the forces of our humanness that threaten to sweep us away. He talks about how we once followed what he calls "the course of this world" and lived according to our "passions." In other words, we did as we wanted, took what we wanted, lashed out at others, hurt others, said hurtful things, nurtured bitterness and envy, and lived for ourselves. And we were swept away by the torrents of these uncontrolled forces.

We have more than enough examples in our world and news of people succumbing to these uncontrolled forces. Swept away by greed, power, lust, entitlement, we have watched the mighty fall. Paul's letter stresses none of us is immune from the brokenness and anarchy of *adam*, of our humanness: not celebrities who have garnered our affection and admiration, not those assuming high governmental or executive offices, not those who are ordained and wear priestly garments. All of us, the great and the small, are trapped by these threatening forces of chaos and brokenness. They hurt us and our relationships with one another. They harm our planet.

But God is on our side! Paul in his letter rehearses God's saving act. God wasn't going to abandon us to the opposing forces, to the enemy. And through God's grace, through God's mercy

and love, we were saved from disaster, saved from a living death as well as a final death, saved from the raging torrents that threatened us. Through Christ, we have been released from the fowlers snare, from captivity, and given a new way of living.

Each week we gather together to give thanks to God who is on our side and to give thanks for being freed from the enemy's control and power. We imagine what might have been if God hadn't been on our side. If God had not been on our side, then we would be burdened by the unbearable weight of guilt for our past actions. If God had not been on our side, we would be paralyzed by our fears and insecurities. If God had not been on our side, we would live selfishly, heedless of others needs or sufferings. If God had not been on our side, we would feel lost and alone in a hostile world. If God had not been on our side, anger and envy and bitterness would infest our hearts. If God had not been on our side, can you imagine what would have become of us? All week long we have these encounters with the forces of *adam* within us and outside of us, that pose dangers and hold us captive.

And we gather here on Sundays to recall with utter relief and gratitude that God *was* on our side, that in the good news of Jesus Christ God has rescued us from the forces of chaos and disaster, and from captivity to our own *adam* tendencies. We are rescued so we may know a different life: a life knowing we are loved, a life of purpose, a life of generosity, a life of compassion and striving to forgive as we have been forgiven. We are freed from fear, from bitterness, from hatred. We are freed to love. We gather together on Sundays to recall that God desires to free us, can indeed free us, and no matter how often we allow succumb to the chaotic forces, God remains on our side. There is indeed hope.

But as we are congratulating ourselves for having God on our side, we must recall something fundamental to the love of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ: God is on *everyone's*

side. God steps in to save us from our *adam* tendencies, from the enemies that cause us chaos and which ensnare us, because God is on the side of *all* humanity. God loves all humanity and desires to save us all from the forces of anarchy that threaten our wellbeing. God is on *our* side: yours and mine, the sinner and the saint, the murderer and the choir boy, the Muslim, Jew, Hindu, or Christian. As Christians, we cannot take sides without remembering this fundamental truth: God is on *everyone's* side. As we read the newspapers and watch the news, the only hope we can have in this messed up world of pain and wrong and injustice, is that God is on our side--the side of humanity.

To be clear: God is not indifferent to injustice. Scriptures show us over and over again a portrait of a God who does indeed stand with the oppressed and the vulnerable. And scriptures call us to oppose injustice and oppression of others. But the message we have in Jesus Christ is that God is on *all* of humanity's side as we all struggle with the forces that alienate and harm. And we who call ourselves Christians who have had a long history of participating in these forces of harm, perhaps we need to recall our need for God's saving work more than most.

And so we gather to confess to ourselves and one another that we cannot live the way of *adam* because these human tendencies will engulf us and overpower us. Instead, we proclaim that our salvation is found in the saving love of God and the way of Jesus Christ. If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, can you imagine what would become of us?