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Psalm 124

THE ALLY

We should always beware of those who claim to have God on their side. History gives us more than a few examples of the disastrous consequences that flow when people claim to have God as their ally in order to justify some action or belief. Think about the Crusades. Or the Inquisition. Or fundamentalist terrorist groups. Or slave traders and slave owners. Or the Doctrine of Discovery that legitimized the conquest of indigenous lands. Or those today who use their religious beliefs to discriminate against LGBTQ people. A lot of harm has been caused by those who claim to have God as their ally.

But that is precisely what we hear the psalmist claim in our scripture reading today. The writer declares, “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.” Of course, an essential difference in this writer’s claim is that the writer and his or her people were the ones *being* attacked. They were the victims of some kind of aggression. And generally speaking, those who have historically claimed to have God as their ally have been the ones *doing* the aggression.

But there is another aspect to the psalmist’s claim that is worth pondering. The writer of Psalm 124 praises God for being on their side when their enemies attacked them, or better translated as, “when our enemies rose up against us.” And the Hebrew word that is used by the writer for “enemy” is the word *adam*, spelled a-d-a-m. We pronounce that word as adam. *Adam* means “the human one” and is the word used to name the first human being created in the story of Genesis. *Adam*. *Adam*, the human one, is the word 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. The real enemy is ourselves. 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.

The psalm writer provides us with the very effective image of raging waters to describe the enemy's destructive force. Doesn't that feel like an accurate image? Have you ever felt swamped by the chaos of everyday life, swallowed up by the major griefs and losses in life, swept away by your own internal darkness and pain and struggle? Much of life is spent fighting or managing anarchy. 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 just when it feels like we are completely engulfed by enemies within and without, the psalmist recalls God's saving acts of love. The psalmist praises the fact that God *was* on our side. 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. It may be that this writer was remembering how God saved the Jewish people from slavery, how God led them out of their cruel bondage in Egypt, and protected them from the raging waters of the Red

Sea. But we recall that same saving act that is found in Jesus. When we are lost to the raging waters of life's destructive forces, when we are swept away by our own failures and brokenness, God intervenes and saves us. Jesus shows us the power of love. Jesus shows us the value in forgiveness. Jesus teaches us generosity and demonstrates compassion. In other words, when our enemies rise up against us, when our *adam* tendencies entrap us, Jesus frees us from our cages. He shows us another way to live.

Each week we gather 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 had not 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, without care for 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. We gather on Sundays to recall with utter relief and gratitude that God *was* on our side and *is* on our side--that the good news of God's love and mercy in Jesus Christ 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. We know that we are loved and have been given a life of purpose, generosity, and compassion. We know that we are to offer compassion and strive to forgive. We are freed from the captivity of fear, and bitterness, and hatred. We gather on Sundays to recall that God desires to free us, can indeed

free us. And no matter how often we succumb to the chaotic forces, God remains on our side. There is indeed hope.

But God is not only on *our* side; God is on *everyone's* side. God steps in to save 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. 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—and desires and works to free us and save us.

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, can you imagine what would become of us?