

If It Had Not Been the Lord Who Was On Our Side

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

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Exodus 14:19-31

Romans 5:6-11

“For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.”

Sitting in the lounge overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem after Shabbat dinner, the story of the Exodus entered our minds as we began to take in the news of Hosni Mubarak’s resignation a few hours before. Cairo was awash in jubilation; modern Israel was beset by anxiety. Was the same God who had been on the side of Hebrew slaves now on the side of these Egyptians, presently chanting their thanksgivings to Allah for deliverance from yet another Pharaoh? David Strauss, senior rabbi of the Mainline Reformed Temple who became our rabbi on the trip responded, as rabbis are wont to do, with a midrash. It went something like this: After the children of Israel had passed through the sea on dry land and as the waters rushed back over the Egyptian army, leaving not one Egyptian alive, the children of Israel danced and sang and gave thanks to God for their deliverance. God, however, was silent. So the puzzled Israelites stopped their festivities long enough to ask the Master of the Universe, “Why are you not rejoicing with us; for you have saved us, your chosen people, from our enemy?” God replied, “How can I rejoice when my children are drowning in the sea?”

The 124th psalm notwithstanding, does the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob take sides on this side of the divide between time and eternity? Or to put a theological point on a somewhat political question, what has God’s election--God’s choice to be Israel’s God, God’s choice in Jesus Christ to be our God—what has election to do with the claim that God is for us in the ambiguities of human history? In a week when religious extremism once again has hidden from our eyes what God is doing in the world to make and keep human life human, these inquiries can no longer be matters for idle speculation of a Sunday morning!

At first glance, the 124th psalm would seem to beg the question of God’s partisanship in history given the congregation’s unquestioning confirmation of and confidence in God’s action on their behalf: “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, when their anger was kindled against us.” In the history of Israel, one thinks of the Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Philistines, to name a few foes against whom Israel prevailed, presumably because God had been on Israel’s side.

But, in fact, these may not be the battle lines the psalmist has in mind. The word in the second verse that the NRSV takes to mean “enemies” is the word that once read in translation and in less inclusive times, “men”, or even more literally, “man”: the word in Hebrew is *’adam*. “If it had not been the Lord who was on our side when man rose up against us....” “The enemies are ‘man’, in contrast to the Lord,” says James Luther Mays, a teacher without equal of the Old Testament. But then Mays goes on to suggest that the struggle about which Israel sings in this psalm is a struggle having to do with Israel’s choice to trust in man, which I take to mean trust in human powers as the decisive power in history, or to trust in the power of God. “The danger was of the quality and kind that posed the basic choice of existence in

history,” says Mays, “the choice between trusting God or man as the decisive power....”

No doubt this is a danger posed to each of us at every moment of our lives. I think of the revolutionaries in Egypt who chose not to put their trust in violence, even when they were met with violence. Perhaps in their own way they are now praying, particularly as they fend off religious fundamentalism in favor of democracy, “If it had not been the Lord who had been on our side”, the God who was with them because they chose to trust God rather than guns or religious extremism! Yet I think this can make our trust in God into a strategy, our victories into the triumph of our moral righteousness, thereby turning the psalmist’s point inside out. The congregation is not awash in thanksgiving because they had chosen to be on God’s side. They are astonished and amazed that God had been on their side; but on their side in what sort of contest?

Given the next few verses, it seems to me the psalmist has an even more decisive struggle in mind than Israel’s struggle with the aggregate of her enemies or, as Mays puts it, with “the nations in their humanness.” More than defeat on the battlefield, if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, says Israel, “then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; then over us would have gone the raging waters.” Here the images suggest a battle of cosmic proportions and “are perhaps an echo of the tradition of the combat against the powers of chaos and of the primeval flood,” says Artur Weiser. Here the battle is God’s, who created the heavens and the earth.

What does that mean? Because, in creating, God did not will all things, the chaos that is unwilled still threatens what God has willed. Therefore, “Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,” wrote someone to Christians in Ephesus, “but against the rulers...the authorities...the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

Where does this battle take place and against whom do we fight? As you know, we are prone to locate the cosmic powers of any given present darkness in the “other” who is our enemy. In so doing, the biblical insight into what we are up against, an insight lurking in the 124th psalm, is missed at every turn in human history. According to Scripture, the battle that is the story of our salvation is between *’adam* and God, a battle that rages within each individual, within each tribe and nation, within every revolutionary movement, within all of human history. To wit, wrote Paul Lehmann in the aftermath of the social upheaval of the 1960’s, “The dialectic of revolution...is that the revolutionary is always nearer to what God is doing in the world to make human life human but is imperiled by the temptation to mistake his own ‘no’ to the existing order for the [really] new order. The revolutionary is...vulnerable...to being overcome of evil,” says Lehmann, “because with his negation he comes so very near to God.” In other words, even and especially in our best intentions and highest moral aspirations, we who are prone to pat ourselves on the back for our righteousness at the center of history, are enemies of God!

In this regard and in the midst of today’s political turmoil, Reinhold Niebuhr’s reflections on the moral meaning and moral obscurities of history could not be more prescient. He writes that the drama of the human story “is, in essence, not so much a contest between good and evil forces in history, as a contest between all men, [between *’adam*] and God.” Since the beginning, or so goes the biblical narrative, *’adam*—which is to say all mortals, “saints and sinners, the righteous and the unrighteous, are inclined to use the freedom to transcend time, history and themselves in such a way as to make themselves the false center of existence. Thus the same freedom,” says Niebuhr, “which gives human life a creative power, not

possessed by other creatures, also endows it with destructive possibilities not known in nature. The two-fold possibility of creativity and destruction in human freedom accounts for the growth of both good and evil through the extension of human powers.”

This truth about human existence makes it hard to name the subject in a sentence such as “If it had not been the Lord who was on our side....” Who takes center stage? If we go along with our normal way of analyzing human history, we who are God’s elect are center stage and God’s defeat of our *enemies* is confirmation of this one true thing. Yet if we continue to follow the sentence to the end, not letting the word enemies keep us from the psalmist’s meaning, we hear another word: If it had not been the Lord who was on our side when ’adam, when our humanness, when our self-centeredness, when our collective and individual sinfulness attacked us and would have swallowed us up; when the flood of that in us which does not will God’s will threatened to sweep us away, the torrent of our opposition to God overwhelm us....”

Plainly put, when in our so-called freedom we place ourselves at the center of human history as the one righteous nation or tribe or religion or even as the one righteous individual, God--whose enemy we become in this contest--*takes our side* by way of God’s judgment that sets a limit upon our defiance and *takes our side* by way of God’s mercy and love “which alone is able to touch the source of the rebellion in the human heart.” This aspect of divine sovereignty, again according to Niebuhr, “is always partly ‘hidden’ and the meaning of life and history is partly obscure, not only because human defiance and moral evil seem to enjoy long periods of immunity [for instance, the seemingly endless prosperity of the wicked mentioned in the 73rd psalm], thus calling the divine justice and power into question [we simply do not see it!]; but also [God seems hidden] because the relation of the divine mercy to the divine justice is obscure.” This is how Israel could say, looking back at the exile even (though this can never be said looking back at the Shoah) that in their defeat and exile, God purposed good for them. If it had not been the Lord who was on the side of God’s chosen people, putting a stop to idolatrous kings and false prophets, then the enemy that they had become to God would have overtaken them.

Likewise, in the shadow of the cross, Paul could say God proved his love for us in that while we were still weak, while we were yet sinners, while we were enemies of God, while we were heirs of ’adam who, from the beginning, chose to know good and not God, God assumed our side, assumed the blood and flesh of the old ’adam in order to pitch a cosmic battle against our captivity to the power of death. “The climax of the Biblical revelation of the divine sovereignty over history,” says Niebuhr, “is in the self-disclosure of a divine love, which on the one hand is able to overcome the evil inclination to self-worship in the human heart and which on the other hand takes the evil of history into and upon itself.”

My friends, if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, if God in Christ had not come to us, if the God who spared not his own Son but delivered him up and handed him over to death for us all, if this God were not for us--in God’s judgment that sets a limit to our rebellion and in God’s forgiving mercy that can redeem even our noble revolutions--then we would be like birds of prey still caught in the fowlers snare. But God has not given us up as prey. We who die in ’adam will be made alive in Christ. In Christ’s rising the snare is broken and, though we yet will die, death’s hold upon our numbered days is defeated by the love that has made room in the eternal life that is God for us.

What, then, has God’s election--God’s choice to be Israel’s God, God’s choice in Jesus Christ to be our God—what has election to do with the claim that God is for us

in the ambiguities of human history? Only this: that in the face of tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril or sword, we may know our help, hidden though it may be, is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. Thanks be to God!