

The God Who Heals and Gives Us Peace

From the series: If God Be For Us...

Scripture: Isaiah 57:19; Romans 8:31

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

We begin today a four-part series on the theme "If God Be For Us ..." Let me introduce the theme with some explanatory remarks.

"If" is "*Ei*" in Greek and is called a conditional particle. It expresses a condition thought of as real or denotes an assumption relating to what has already happened. This is the case in the text of the morning. Paul set forth his understanding of all God had done in Jesus Christ. He deals in Romans 8 with suffering and hope. He points to the Spirit praying through our groanings that defy utterance. He concludes with that declaration of profound trust - God working in all things for our good.

Romans 8:31 is one of the greatest statements of trust ever penned and it begins with Paul's words, "What then are we to say to these things?" His answer to his question: *If God is for us, who is against us?*

Thus, my first comment. The "If" points not to uncertainty but to certainty. We could perhaps better translate it "Since." Since God is for us ... This is not a tentative statement; rather, it is an affirmation of deep trust and solid conviction. God is for us, or as the NEB translates, "God is on our side".

That particular translation brings me to my second comment. The claim, the conviction that God is on our side is the source of a very great comfort if properly understood and may be the source of a very dangerous arrogance if not understood correctly.

Let me address the latter first: Claiming God on our side can be a dangerous arrogance; it misses the point of Paul's claim. The human situation is full of conflict; conflict between nations, ethnic groups, political parties, cultural movements; conflict between individuals. Our present cultural situation has been marked by the descriptive phrase "culture wars." In human conflict situations, it is presumptuous and arrogant to claim God is on our side. God does not take sides in those conflicts; our human perspective may be sincere and even responsible, but it is too much to claim God on our side.

A story is told of Abraham Lincoln during the tragic days of the Civil War. A Calvinist minister in a time of prayer thanked God that God was on the Union side. Afterward, Lincoln was heard to say the question was not whether God was on the Union side, but, rather, whether the Union was on God's side.

When Paul claims God is on our side, he is pointing to something other than God being for one party over another, one nation over another. Rather, Paul is making the great claim that God is for the human family – even broader, that God is for Creation in all of its wonder and complexity. God is for, is on the side of, the wellbeing of Creation.

As I indicated above, Paul prefaces this claim with the question, "What then shall we say to these things?" That is, are the things Paul has been pointing to – the whole movement of God's Spirit to effect salvation - salvation which means wholeness – liberation? Liberation from bondage of every sort. Paul was convinced that God was engaged with, involved in, the whole of creation and the human situation in order to effect salvation or wholeness or *Shalom*.

It is clear from this letter to the Romans that Paul saw the whole world in bondage - the Jew, the Gentile - indeed, in this chapter he even speaks of the bondage of creation, but it is also clear that he did not see the present state of things as the final word.

There was plenty of trouble. He lists famine, nakedness, peril, sword. We might make a list with different items - ethnic feuds, religious wars, cancer, terrorism, urban decay, youth gang wars. Paul did not put his head in the sand; yet, he was convinced of something else - an ultimate power for the wellbeing of Creation and the liberation of humankind, rooted in the love of God.

That is the ground of the claim of our text. God is on our side - the human side, creation's side - because the ultimate reality of the world, of the whole grand scheme of things, is the love of God. Paul saw this demonstrated in the event of Jesus Christ. Jesus, who died the victim of the world's darkness and evil, was raised from the dead, brought into God's very presence and was there praying for us. When it seemed the forces of darkness had carried the day, that the human No to God had prevailed, God said No to our No and Yes to life, to the future, to the final triumph of God.

Thus, Paul says, "What can separate us from the love of God?" And he answers, in a word, "nothing."

That is the biblical picture - the big picture. God is love. God is for us. That was Israel's faith. The reading from Isaiah 57 comes from what scholars speak of as Third Isaiah. The whole book in the Hebrew Scripture is called Isaiah, but it is generally recognized that there are writings from three hands and three periods - 1-39, 40-55, 56-65. The first is from an 8th century prophet Isaiah; the second from a prophet during Judah's Exile in Babylon - the one who assumed the return

of the Exile to Jerusalem; the third a prophet who wrote during the period of the return, around 530 BCE. Things did not turn out the way the Exile prophet had envisioned. There was no restoration of the glory of Jerusalem. Poverty and despair marked the post-exilic period. In that situation, the one we call Third Isaiah called Judah for laxness in religious observance and failure to create a just and compassionate society. God's anger was experienced as God's judgment on that failure. Yet, true to the spirit of Israel's prophets, it was declared that God's anger was but for a moment with the purpose of turning the People back to the Lord. And the prophet speaks these words that form our text:

"I have seen their ways, but I will heal them ... Peace, peace to the far and the near, says the Lord".

That is always the last word in the story of God's People - I will heal them ... Peace, peace ... This is the deep substructure of the whole biblical drama - A God Who is for us - A God Who heals us - Who gives us peace.

That is the nature of God, according to the Scriptures of Israel, according to Paul as he contemplated his faith in God in the light of Jesus - and it is still the picture that sustains us and heals us and gives us peace.

Yesterday I attended the Bat Mitzvah of the daughter of Rabbi and Mrs. Alpert at the Muskegon Temple. Eliza, at age 13, went through the rite of passage; she moved into adulthood. For three years her father, the Rabbi, had been preparing her. She read from the Hebrew Torah (beautifully, I must say). She delivered the sermon - a very thoughtful one. She led the worship of that congregation. The Temple was nearly full, a quite amazing statement of community, of love and support. After experiencing that, I do not wonder that the Jewish People have continued a destined people through the millennia.

I was not only experiencing the worship, but also reflecting on my theme for this morning - The God Who heals and gives us peace. I was struck by the fact that God's people are always looking for closure, for God to come and bring things to a proper conclusion.

Second Isaiah in Babylon's exile cried,

"Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem ... A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord ... Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings, lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem ... say to the cities of Judah, Behold your God."

If you would go through chapters 40-55, you would find some of the most moving passages of the Scripture. Judah will return and the glory will return, for God is coming to redeem and glorify the People of God's Covenant Love. The reality: a small remnant returned. They lived in poverty and despair, disillusioned that the

glory was absent. Along comes third Isaiah. He picks up the stirring words of the earlier prophet, but explains the poor situation as the consequence of Judah's disobedience. Yet, he holds before them the promise of our text: healing, peace.

Finally a second Temple is built, but they weep because it has not the glory of the first. They remain for the most part an occupied territory, never realizing the promises of the prophet in exile. Five hundred years later and Jesus is born. Again the ancient world senses it is on the edge of the End. And we have noted in past weeks how that early Jewish Jesus movement waited expectantly for the return of the Son of Man, of the Messiah from heaven. But, it did not happen.

Yesterday Eliza Alpert spoke of the Journey and the Dream. She spoke of Israel's founding leader, Moses. He led the People to the borders of the Promised Land, but could not go in. Joshua was the one who finally brought them over. And she pointed to Rabin - a man of war who became a man of peace, but in the midst of the peace process was cut down by an assassin's bullet. And she appealed to her people to do Joshua's work - to take up the peace initiative of the fallen leader.

Well, as I said, I was thinking of this long, ancient tradition - this people of whom we, too, are a part, for we were born from Israel's womb. We pray, we long for the consummation of God's purposes in history. The images of *Shalom* play before our eyes. We read of terror on the street, of the awful conflict fanned into flame again in Northern Ireland, of the excavation of more graves in Bosnia, of terrorism in Saudi Arabia and Moscow and who knows where next.

Or we have experience of the word "cancer" spoken over us, or of the failure, the disappointment of one on whom we counted. Or we see starkly our own tragic flaw. And where do we turn? To whom?

And for what do the groanings of our inward being long? All of this I contemplated in light of the God spoken of in the text as "the God Who heals and gives us peace."

I experienced that healing and that peace in that Bat Mitzvah service. There was a young woman surrounded by her family, extended family, community of faith. The family was smaller than it might have been because her mother's family suffered great loss in the Holocaust. She spoke of Moses who had a dream, led the journey, but failed to enter the Promised Land. She spoke of Rabin, the warrior become peacemaker, cut down by an assassin's bullet. And she called her people to take up the cause of peace and human freedom.

I find that quite remarkable. It would seem that the prophetic images of the new Creation, of the reign of *Shalom* when lion and lamb lie down together and they do not hurt or destroy in all God's Holy Mountain are not really future states of history, but rather, the ever present judgment on our discord and tragic warring – and not only images of judgment on our present, but also promises of present possibility because God is not so much the future binder up of present wounds as

the present healer and peace giver to those who open their lives to the Spirit to love and to grace.

I experienced the healing, the peace of God in that moment. The long story of the ages, the images of *Shalom*, the longing, the yearning, the repeated failure of history's reality to measure up to the promise - all of that coalesced in the moment of a young woman claiming her place in the line of generations of a people who live lives in dialogue, in communion with the living God.

It is quite something, this being human. Many are broken on the rocks of human reality. Dear God, the suffering. Many have become cynical, embittered because the prayer was not answered, the promise not fulfilled. Many are hollow persons, empty and void of meaning or purpose.

And the usual posture, I suppose, of the Church has been to condemn those whose hopes have been shattered and whose prayers left hanging in the air. But, when I experience God's love and grace and presence so tangibly as I did yesterday in the faith of a beautiful young person supported by the love of family and community - when I let the words of Paul wash over me, then I know a healing and a peace that nothing can take away. Then I know something of the present Presence of the God Whose ways are past finding out, but Whose healing grace and gracious peace are here and now.

It is not out there, dear friend, it is right here. Oh, I do believe there is more but God will take care of that. But, the real possibility is the present possession of a peace that passes human understanding. To experience that peace is to be healed here and now in the midst of bombings and strokes and cancer, and all the tragedy that laces the human story.

And this is the care we trust because we trust the loving center of things - the God Who said "Let there be," the God Who says, "I will be with you," Whose Presence we experience in the presence of the other, in the community of faith, the God Who heals us and gives us peace. God knows it is not easy to be a creature, to be human. God knows and God promises "nothing shall ever separate you from my love."

So, then, what shall we say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us!